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RETIRED
MILITARY
JAPAN

THE GREATEST
MAGICMASTER'S

1



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Alice Tilake

A girl who is cheerful and easy to talk to, she is always gentle and maternal. She has great talent for magic, and together with her best friend Tesfia, she receives instruction from Alus and begins to put her trust in him.



Loki Leevahl

A silver-haired girl who idolizes Alus. She enlisted in the army and transfers to the Institute, chasing after him. She's an excellent Magicmaster, and is very good at detecting Fiends.



Tesfia Fable


An elite noble girl with crimson hair. She's also the top novice Magicmaster in her class year. She starts off seeing Alus as a rival, but is gradually drawn to him, and...?



Alus Reigin

The story's protagonist. A genius and the strongest Magicmaster despite his young age. Of the nine Single Digits, he stands at the top as the current No. 1. Due to his having grown up on the battlefield, he somewhat lacks common sense.

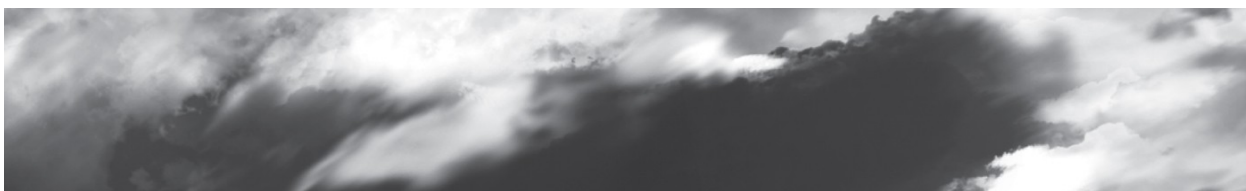




**“I’ve tried
harder than
anyone else...
what more
am I supposed
to do?”**

**She traced a finger
down the wall, then
her arms went limp.**





The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

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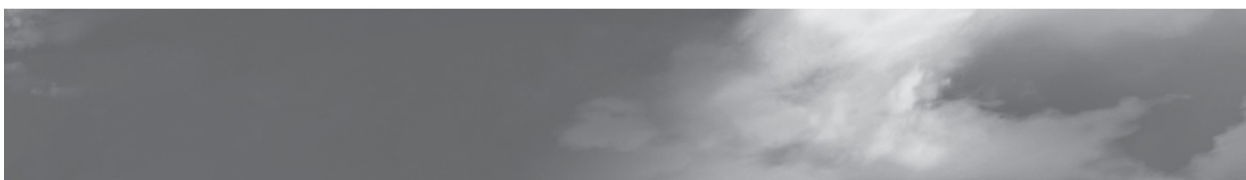
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Prologue

The ruined land was filled with the debris of destroyed buildings, making it look like a natural disaster had occurred.

You could no longer tell by looking at it that this land had once been bustling with people. The deserted buildings were decaying with trees and vines twined around them, something that wouldn't happen in just a few years.

In fact—more than 100 years had passed since this land was abandoned.

Looking at it, it wouldn't be strange to assume that civilization had perished. Depending on who looked at it, this was what it had always been like.

The sight of destruction had survived the passage of time, causing even sorrow to fade away.

The clear blue sky spread out endlessly in all directions, dyeing even the edges of the horizon in blue. The dense greenery was bathed in sunlight and gave off the vivid color of abundant life. It was a majestic landscape.

Animals ran through the trees, frolicking about on the carpet of greenery.

Somebody once said humans were the true vermin of the planet, and this scene confirmed it.

What brought this about was the appearance of an existence that went against the definition of a living creature. Something too unnatural and grotesque mixed in with the laws of nature for them to be described as 'creatures.'

The introduction of these abnormal monsters that were like something out of a fairy tale caused the normal ecosystem to return to this land. It was the turning point in human history, and the countdown to ruin began.

They didn't have the wondrous look of the creatures in books, but rather were ominous and hair-raising.

These monsters that could have been sent by the gods as saviors of the planet were the natural enemy of humans.

Thus humanity took to calling these abnormal monsters 'Fiends.'

* * *

Right now, one young man was clashing with several of these abnormal beings.

The enormous abnormals wielding tree trunks like clubs stood out the most. They easily wielded their lethal weapons that would kill anyone with a single swing.

Meanwhile, this young man was using a short sword, and a crookedly-shaped one at that. Its form embodied dread as a symbol of bloodlust. Its purpose was to reap life. It was a weapon made for the sake of killing the abnormals before him.

Affixed to the short sword's handle, at the bottom, was a thin chain that extended from the scabbard hanging off the man's waist. It was an odd weapon that one would think would be ineffective against the giant Fiend several times the size of the man.

Fiends were extremely diverse. It was normal for even Fiends of the same species to look different enough to be assumed to be of another species entirely. The only thing they had in common was their sinister and ugly appearance.

There were one-eyed giants, but there were also those with the upper half of a human and the lower half of a beast.

At the moment, the young man faced more than ten Fiends.

And those were just the ones he could see. He felt the stares of even more behind him and in the woods, with dangerous glints in their eyes as they looked at him.

Perhaps due to their arrogance as absolute predators, they were looking down on him as their prey to play with.

It was a situation that would cause anyone to despair. To even struggle would be useless.

Yet the young man showed not the slightest trace of panic.

In fact he approached the Fiends, taking light, elegant steps. His jet-black hair swayed with each step he took.

As the edges of the young man's lips rose—the Fiends attacked all at once.

The massive frames piling atop the young man blocked out the sunlight, making it look like night had fallen. In that instant—the first Fiend's war cry was cut short and replaced with silence.

That was because its body burst open as if it had been crushed by something from both sides.

As for the young man, he had his hands pressed together.

With the Fiend between them.

Deep green fluids rained down, but the ferocious Fiends didn't so much as flinch.

The young man must've known they wouldn't react. As he continued to bisect Fiend after Fiend with his short sword lightly grasped in his hand, it was like an absolute force trampling a swarm of ants.

His breathing was practically normal.

And the short sword that was supposed to be in his hand seemingly vanished in an instant.

Explaining the disappearance was the chain's free movement through the area. But not in a straight line—rather it wove its way toward its targets.

Only the metallic sound of a chain being dragged rang through the air. Several Fiends were pierced by the chain and were now perfectly still. It was a mysterious silence, leaving it unclear whether they were dead or alive.

Despite their brutish excitement, the Fiends that had been frothing at the mouth were stopped by a mere short sword piercing them just before they reached their prey.

The chain continued to run through the abundant trees. Bizarre death screams rang out in succession.

Then the young man finally spoke. "That's all of them."

He wasn't speaking to anyone in particular, but simply remarking to himself.

He stroked the chain with his finger, before setting his eye on one of the small rings making up the chain.

«*Resonate*»

The young man pulled the small ring.

The 207th Chain Formula—the chain's rings were so plentiful you'd go crazy counting them—each ring had a magic formula for a unique spell engraved on it. The sound of a bell caused slight tremors in the air and tickled his earlobes.

And the Fiends pierced and connected by the chain all burst open from the inside at the same moment.

The area was now stained with the Fiends' body fluid. Lumps of their body meat scattered all over in a gruesome sight. It was as if the parts were superimposed on the beautiful and vividly colored world.

Despite being in the middle of it all, not a speck of fluid or meat touched the young man's body.

Even so, the vile stench that filled the area was getting stronger, so he pulled out a canteen from his pouch. Throwing a glance at his surroundings, he let loose a sigh as he opened the canteen. Inside was perfectly regular, yet crystal-clear water.

He stared up into the heavens.

A beautiful sky. Each white cloud had a different shape. The clouds freely drifting in whatever direction they pleased made him a little envious.

Ironically enough, this scenery only existed in the Fiends' world... the Outer World.

While some had the chance to visit the Outer World on missions, where the Fiends ran rampant, those unrelated to this line of work would likely never see this sight.

This sight was probably something that people instinctively yearned for. Longing for the 'real world' that humans once lived in. It was just like people to realize the value of something only once it was gone.

With his sight fixed on the never-ending sky, the young man raised his arm above his head and poured water over himself.

As there wasn't much water in the canteen, the flow soon stopped. He shook the water off his face and turned to the skies once more. At some point this had become his tradition. Looking up at the beautiful sky after refreshing himself with a quick shower gave him a different impression.

Doing this might have shown how much his heart ached for it.

The young man regretfully left the scene, before more Fiends were attracted by the scent of the body fluids.

This young man's name is Alus Reigin.
Of the Magicmasters who oppose the Fiends, he stands at the very top.

First Chapter: New World

"Can't you reconsider?"

"No, I've worked more than enough. I've reclaimed the continents of Zentley and Covent. I'm going to take it easy from now on," Alus firmly declared to his superior.

His superior was dressed in a white military uniform. On his chest hung large numbers of medals in an ordered fashion. The aged superior seated on the other side of the desk pinched the area between his eyes with a troubled expression. "You are an invaluable asset for our country, no, for all of humanity. So I can't let you go just because you say so. Sorry, but I can't accept your retirement from service."

"With all due respect, Governor-General, the regulations state that those who have served in the military for 10 years and earned achievements above a certain level are free to retire should they choose to. I've served since I was six, so that's 10 years this year. And surely you're not going to say that reclaiming two continents is not enough of an achievement?"

The Governor-General struggled to keep his bitter emotions from showing on his face. He knew how important those regulations were, but he couldn't help but feel a grudge against whoever came up with them.

While that was certainly what the regulations said, a Magicmaster held a very high status and a revered position. The Magicmasters were tasked with protecting the country, and reclaiming lost territory. Humanity's greatest wish.

Yet this black-haired young man didn't understand this. Or rather, he had no interest in it. Perhaps it was something only those born and raised in this small world could understand.

Especially since he'd served since he was six years old... Normally that was simply unthinkable. The general rule was that you had to be 14 to join the Magicmasters.

But this young man's talents as a Magicmaster had been acknowledged at age six, and despite his young age, his mana exceeded that of high-ranking Magicmasters. Of course, there was no way the military would ever leave such a valuable asset alone, and they even skipped Alus' general education in favor of assigning him to Magicmaster training.

Maybe it was the Governor-General who didn't understand—age-wise he was closer to retirement, so he never imagined this black-haired teenager would request retirement first. He felt like he was finally getting the bill for imposing so many unreasonable demands upon the young man.

All Magicmasters in the army earned a considerable wage. And though the citizens' taxes paid for this wage, nobody complained about it. That was because all of humanity understood the importance.

Seven major nations made up the bulwark of the continent of Azecil, and among them the nation of Alpha had achieved outstanding military gains.

The majority of those gains were made possible by the existence of one person. That person was Alus Reigin, a Single Digit Magicmaster.

His black hair fell into his eyes, and his muscled hands, far from those of a child, told the tale of how intense his short life had been.

A hundred years ago, the Fiends that suddenly appeared reduced the human population to one-tenth of what it had been. The countries that made up the world diminished down to seven. Right now, humanity's living space was forced into 1/700th of its former glory.

The concept of magic being put to military use was a recent development. The magic at that time wasn't able to stand up to the Monsters, the giant Fiends. Magic had only been used as an assistance to support people in their daily lives. The advancement of magic was all due to the Fiends' invasion.

Fiends ate humans, destroying cities and countries alike. The population reduction was finally stopped due to magical technology being introduced into the military.

The seven nations formed themselves into a circle that served as a defensive line for their survival. And the giant White Tower rising in the center of it all was humanity's greatest achievement.

At the top of the tower was a barrier that covered the seven nations, which managed to stop the Fiends' invasion. That was the fruit of research efforts in the field of magic. For more than 50 years after that, humanity had been desperately training Magicmasters to reclaim their territory.

"Then how about an extended leave? Of course, we can guarantee you a comfortable living, and we'll see to it that your desires are fulfilled to the best of our abilities. We'll support your research. I'll have the necessary equipment and facilities prepared."

"And in return, I'll have to respond if I'm called up?"

The Governor-General nodded, a strict expression showing on his wrinkled face. Losing Alus now would result in their national strength being cut in half. They'd be put in a position where they'd struggle to defend their borders, and trying to reclaim any lost territory would be out of the question.

With the death toll among Magicmasters on a constant rise each year, not only was the nation of Alpha making military gains, but its casualties were on the decline as well. That, too, was thanks to this 16-year-old man.

In the ten years that Alus had been a Magicmaster, Alpha had had the lowest Magicmaster death toll among the seven nations. The nations shared a common goal, working to protect the giant White Tower for the sake of humanity's survival. But the underlying state of affairs was different. Asking for help from another nation was considered shameful, and losing national power was a matter of dignity.

While the seven nations shared a common front, they also fiercely competed for prestige.

"I understand," Alus said curtly. He'd already known he wouldn't be able to retire without trouble. This was a good compromise. For better or for worse, Alpha was overly reliant on him.

He knew the Governor-General had taken steps to deal with that, but excellent Magicmasters weren't so easy to educate and train. In the end, there hadn't been enough time.

The Governor-General sank back in his chair and let out an exhausted sigh. He'd known this day would come eventually.

The young man was an exception amongst exceptions. In the military where selfish and calculating behavior was common, this young man, whose talents surpassed the common in every regard, had simply produced the results that had been asked of him.

The Governor-General felt it couldn't be helped that the sentiment of sacrificing himself for the greater cause was lacking in this young man, considering that he'd grown up in a world like that; but at the same time, he was impatient with himself that he'd been too slow to counteract it.

"I will follow up as soon as the preparations are ready. Until then, stand by at home."

Alus straightened his posture. "Understood." He bowed and excused himself.

Alus had always shown a lack of understanding when it came to the subtleties of the heart. That's why he would need to learn the 'education' he never got, in the place that would be prepared next for him.

Even if Alus' determination didn't change, the Governor-General felt that would be fine, too. To begin with, the military was the protector of humanity, and an organization that craved order. Which was why, when Alus asked for confirmation with his 'I'll have to respond if I'm called up?'—he'd had no choice but to bitterly nod his head.

The Governor-General couldn't risk losing his greatest military asset. So if Alus were to find something to protect out of his own will at the next place prepared for him, he might not have to give the young man that order for the first time.

Having thought that far ahead, Governor-General Berwick Sarebian decided to reset his thinking, which further deepened the wrinkles on his forehead. Pulling out a roster from the documents on his desk, he pressed a card-like terminal to his ear. He'd managed to stave off Alus' retirement for now, but he had no choice but to accept his withdrawal from the frontlines against the Fiends.

It was clear that Governor-General Sarebian would be very busy preparing for emergencies and more organizational work, such as official personnel change announcements.

* * *

It was time for the Second Magical Institute's entrance ceremony.

The great hall situated on the Institute's vast grounds in Alpha's city of Beliza was full of young students seeking to become Magicmasters. But there was a single empty seat.

Maybe someone was sick, the students thought, then paid it no further mind.

Having passed the entrance exams, they were practically promised futures as Magicmasters. They were the elite who had passed that famously difficult test.

For the sake of protecting the continent of Azecil, they had knocked on the gates of the only Magicmaster institute in Alpha. Likewise, the other nations each had only one institute as well. By the time they were allowed into the entrance ceremony, they were no longer civilians.

Becoming a student of the Institute was synonymous with becoming a protector of humanity.

At the same time—they were tools to expand the nation's domain and prestige.

On the surface, the Institute claimed to be educating and training Magicmasters, but in reality, all graduates were put into military service.

Of course, there were no fools entering the Institute who were unaware of this. If anything, they all voluntarily walked down that path.

Being a Magicmaster gave one a high status, you would never starve, and it was a very prestigious profession. They staked their lives to protect the nation.

That kind of duty had a wonderful ring to it, which was why people were enraptured and looked up to it.

On top of that, combat magic was banned for common citizens. Only basic magic required for living was allowed, which of course wasn't even classified as first-rank magic.

There was no way youths wouldn't be attracted to the more advanced magic with infinite possibilities. And for them to use that power, they'd either need to become soldiers, or join the Institute that the military ran.

That's why they accepted the challenge of the Institute's exam. They sought the license to use magic that was issued by the Institute.

Alus arrived early on the day of the entrance ceremony.

He figured the luggage he'd sent ahead would be arriving around now. There was a lot for him to do, like cleaning up and preparing.

Being a place for training Magicmasters, the grounds covered a considerable area. The Institute had three years' worth of green Magicmasters, making for a total of about 1,000 students, all of whom lived in the dorms on-site. In addition, there were training grounds and research facilities for the study of magic.

In sum, the Institute took up a fifth of Beliza's total area, and Beliza was the largest city in Alpha. It was so big that one day wouldn't be anywhere near enough to visit all of the buildings.

As such, the students were given an insignia that permitted them to use the Circle Ports, or transport gates that were established throughout the grounds.

Alus was a new student, but he had no intentions of attending the ceremony. To him, this was just a place he'd ended up at on the Governor-General's orders. The time he spent here would be a temporary grace period that he would use completely for himself.

His head was full of arrangements and plans so he could spend the three years until graduation devoting himself to research.

"Are you a freshman too?"

Calling out to Alus was a naïve-seeming female student wearing a uniform without a single wrinkle on it. She had pale chestnut-colored hair to her shoulders, and a coquettish smile on her lips.

On the left side of her chest was a brand-new insignia. Alus gave the insignia, which was leaning because of the girl's particularly eye-catching breasts, a brief glance. "That's right. You too?"

"Yes. I just couldn't wait, so I came early." The atmosphere the girl gave off had a playful feel to it, and her expression relaxed into a gentle smile, maybe because she'd found a fellow freshman.



A refreshing breeze fitting for spring blew, making her hair sway.

Alus restrained his urge to move along, and opened his mouth with the sole intent of putting an end to this whole 'new students' chat.

That was when—

"Alice, what are you doing? It seems the inauguration isn't starting yet, but we can wait inside." A cheerful voice called out, and the girl called Alice turned around.

A redhead, whose hair fluttered back and forth, approached them from afar.

"I'm sorry, I'll be right there." It seemed this redhead was Alice's friend.

Perfect, thought Alus. "Well, I have business to attend to."

The words made the girl tilt her head and look at him with confusion. It must have seemed strange for a new student to have business to attend to on the entrance ceremony day. "Aren't you going to the ceremony?"

"Like I said, I have business."

"I see... Then I'll see you at the ceremony," Alice gave him a small wave, smiling.

"... if we meet each other," Alus mumbled to himself, looking away. Of course, he had no intention of attending the ceremony. After nodding to the girl and her redhead friend, he turned his back on them.

"My luck this morning has been rotten." He let those words leak out as he cast a backward glance at the girls walking away, then headed for the laboratory that had been prepared for him.

Second Chapter: The Difference Between the Ideal and Reality

Alus found himself inside a room in a newly constructed building for experiments, looking around with his recently arrived luggage.

The room was different from the teachers' laboratory. No matter how he looked at it, it was larger than the room the teachers used. In fact, it was an entire floor. And the fact that it was designed to be used by one of their incoming freshman students didn't sit well with the teachers.

To begin with, the regulations stated that all students without exception were to be assigned to the dormitories. With the country being the Institute's governing body, that was one of the measures taken to prevent any scandals from happening.

Novice Magicmasters had the tendency to see magic as something to be used for themselves, due to their still immature minds. Even minor difficulties had the possibility of developing into a catastrophe, which had happened more than a few times. If civilians got caught up in the crossfire, not even the country could overlook it.

"All of the equipment here is cutting edge. Huh, I can't say I wanted to enter this Institute, but I can't complain about this," Alus muttered.

Being a facility for training Magicmasters, the Institute naturally had secret connections to the military. In the end, Alus wouldn't be able to get away from their influence. As someone who'd been raised as a Magicmaster since infancy and who'd joined the military at the age of six, he still felt relatively free though.

After putting his small amount of luggage into his bedroom, he got to work rummaging through the bookshelves. There he found the books he'd ordered ahead of time neatly put in place. All of them were books in the field of magic, far more advanced than the basics, and none of them covered practical applications of the field.

Most of them were old books. Some covered completely impractical or questionable theories that wouldn't even catch a second glance from professionals.

Now, the possibilities of magic were split into many different branches. That's why Alus was going to start by learning from his predecessors. Any theory, no matter how preposterous or absurd it might be, could have a hint of genius in it that he wasn't going to overlook.

Alus seriously believed that these peculiar concepts could lead to the next level of magic. The research he'd done himself had gotten results.

The most extreme of those preposterous books on the shelves were three of the Four Books of Fegel. It was rumored that the last of the four books didn't even exist. They were copied books, but even that was enough for

Alus to feel indebted to the Governor-General. And if there were any books he needed for his research that he didn't have, he could just use the library.

When it came to researching the field of magic, there was no place better suited than here.

As Alus started getting excited over his future plans, he could feel more and more ideas gushing out from the spring that was his inquisitive mind.

All of the books he flipped through contained precious articles. Normally, preparing all of this for a single person would be out of the question. But Alus had submitted several theses and research results, so this was a hospitality extended to him for his achievements in the field of magic.

Just as Alus thought to himself, *Looks like I can lead a fulfilling life here, just like the Governor-General said...* the sound of several light knocks on the door from an unexpected visitor echoed through the room, interrupting his line of thought.

"Come in."

Immediately after he said that, a young woman in formal wear entered. "How do you do. I'm the principal of the Institute, Sisty Nexophia. Nice to meet you, Alus."

Alus knew of her name as well. She was a famous Magicmaster who went by the alias 'Witch.' Supposedly she had withdrawn from active duty, but her mana that leaked out was still as sharp as ever.

"I know of you, Madam Witch Sisty. I'm Alus Reigin. I was thinking of paying you a visit after I'd tidied up."

She'd retired from active duty and now served as the principal of the Institute. There was no way she would be this young, but the fact that she appeared to be in her mid-twenties was the reason she was still called Witch. Her lustrous, light brown hair was gracefully waved and reached all the way down to her waist.

She had a good chest, which her narrow waist only helped to emphasize. Her looks and actual age didn't match in the slightest.

The principal smiled at the unaffected Alus. At the same time, the mana floating about vanished. "That's a Single Digit Magicmaster for you. I guess this isn't enough to faze you. Also, my title isn't Witch but Principal."

"Excuse me. But still, you say the strangest things, Principal. I recall you were a Single Digit when you were in active duty, too."

"That was a long time ago. And I was 9th. I was only a Single Digit for a brief period of time." She shrugged her shoulders modestly with a smile, but in Alpha there were none who didn't know her name.

When she was active, she was one of the most prominent Magicmasters in Alpha, and with her many connections in the military she was naturally elected as Principal of the Second Magical Institute after retirement. She had produced a great many excellent Magicmasters.

"More importantly, are you sure you should be here? The entrance ceremony is being held right now."

"My turn on stage is over, you see."

Alus didn't think that the principal leaving the entrance ceremony halfway through was such a good idea, but he'd never had much interest in it either, so he chose not to say anything.

Just having been a Single Digit was enough to earn the admiration of the students. She must have bathed in their intense gazes. *Thank you for your hard work.*

Now that he thought about it, she did look mentally fatigued. Maybe some words of appreciation would be apt, but showing care would make her less reserved the next time. Sensing that risk, Alus decided to pretend he didn't notice the principal's expression.

"If you're going to point that out, I'll note that you're absent from the ceremony too, Alus," Sisty said, looking somewhat disappointed at not getting the results she wanted, just as Alus had expected.

"I just want to advance my own research. I have no intention of attending the same classes as the other students, nor do I have time to make friends."

"We can't have that. I have instructions from the Governor-General that you are to rejoin the frontlines should you slack on your studies."

"—!! What a tyrannical old geezer." Retiring from the army was supposed to be Alus' freedom. That said, he was well aware how much his contributions meant to the military, as well as to all of humanity. The Governor-General not letting him retire was only natural. That's exactly why they had reached a compromise.

Up to now, he'd been working nonstop on missions. It appeared a crack had risen in his fleeting plan to spend the rest of his life peacefully.

The principal covered her mouth with her hand and laughed seductively. "Please don't worry. All you need to do for your credits is to attend the bare minimum of classes and complete your report assignments. And as for your ranking... I'd like you to keep that confidential, so as to avoid any unnecessary confusion."

Rankings were a way to display a Magicmaster's power... and the identities of the Single Digits were normally kept a secret from the public.

That's why, even though it was the principal's order, Alus had no objections. "Of course. I'm not one to brag about my ranking. Nothing bad could come from avoiding trouble."

"Haha... that's true. Then I wish you a meaningful student life."

After telling Alus to come to the principal's office should anything ever happen, Sisty left with a smile on her face.

Before long, an empty feeling filled the room, as he worried for his future prospects. Alus let out a heavy sigh. "My time..."

* * *

The Institute required the roughly 400 freshmen to attend lectures on courses in their curriculum. Classes were split for the most part, and would only come together for the practical subjects such as mock training.

Three weeks had passed since classes began. Today was the first time Alus attended class.

Not a single subject caught his interest, and he'd been cooped up in his laboratory, but last week he figured that if he didn't attend something soon he wouldn't have enough attendance days.

Today was a day for a lot of practical subjects. The first period was on the fundamentals of magic.

By now, Alus was well beyond the need to study the basics. He'd received special education for gifted children in the military ever since he was six; on top of that, he'd rapidly advanced in the field of magic through self-study. Though that was primarily in the militaristic department, focusing on lethality and aggression.

When he entered the classroom, circles of friends had already formed.

The basic configuration for classes in freshman year was to have 10 classes, with 40 students in each class. Class hadn't even started, but the room was already abuzz with discussion about magic from yesterday's lectures.

Alus picked a seat at random in the back, and started reading a thick book.

His classmates, who were seeing him for the first time today, gave him suspicious looks, but Alus didn't mind. He'd never had any intention of getting along with them.

That was when a girl with chestnut-colored hair approached him with graceful movements. "Good morning. It's nice to meet you... again. Allow me to reintroduce myself. I'm Alice Tilake. You're Mr. Alus, right?"

"Hm? Yeah." Not realizing at first she was talking to him, Alus gave her a delayed nod, his eyes still locked on his book.

The girl's use of the words "again" and "were" suggested they'd met somewhere before, but since he couldn't remember right away, he returned his focus to his book.

Alice seemed unsure of how to react to that. She changed the topic to shake off her dejection. "Were you feeling under the weather? Either way, I'm glad you've recovered."

"No, I was just skipping class. There didn't seem to be any decent lectures. Anyway, sorry but you're distracting me. I would appreciate it if you didn't bother me."

"...!! I'm sorry."

Those blunt words of his paid no heed to the atmosphere, making them sound all the more like they were his true feelings.

Alice's mood dropped like a rock, and she quickly lowered her head. When she turned around with a still-gloomy look on her face, another voice suddenly rang out.

"Who the hell do you think you are!!" A female student with lustrous red hair stood up with enough momentum to send her chair falling backwards.

The class immediately looked their way. All eyes were focused on the two.

A strong-willed redhead was making her anger known. She had a clear refinement to her, as she looked at Alus with an unyielding glare. Though that lacked a bit of impact due to her being not quite tall enough.

"What...?" Alus said. This was getting tiresome.

"Don't give me that. Alice was looking out for you, so don't give her that attitude!"

After thinking about it for a moment, Alus decided that leaving this be would come back to bite him in the ass. He had no intention of getting along, but being involved in a disagreement would eat away at his precious time.

He got up from his seat and faced Alice, who stood frozen some distance away. She looked back and forth between Alus and the redhead who was glaring at him.

"I'm sorry. Just... in the future, you don't have to worry about me."

"Of course! I'm sorry for approaching you suddenly, too."

The redheaded girl immediately addressed the bowing Alice. "You don't have to apologize, Alice!"

Having heard the relieved girl's answer, Alus had sat back down and began reading again. But—

"I'm Tesfia Fable," the redheaded girl continued. Her tone was still dangerous.

"..."

What a pain, Alus thought, clicking his tongue in his mind. He'd already told the first girl 'not to worry about me,' and now this.

Seeing as how she wasn't getting an answer, the girl shook with anger and stomped up to Alus. She grabbed the book out of his hands.

This is the worst. The focus he'd had was severed now like a fragile thread. Alus instinctively sensed that this red-haired girl... was probably the type he hated the most. The kind that forced their own will onto others, demanded obedience from others.

"Can I have my book back?"

"I, a noble, have gone through the trouble of giving you my name. Isn't it only courteous that you do the same?"

"Forcing your courtesy onto others... the nobility sure are tyrannical. No, I guess that's what makes you 'esteemed nobility.'"

"—!!"

The pages of the book the girl had taken flapped about as the book flew toward Alus. But he caught the book without any trouble. "Thank you for returning my book. I'm Alus Reigin. There, I introduced myself. Happy now? I don't have any interest in you anymore, so could you go away?"

"N-No interest?! And you called me... tyrannical?! How dare you make such abusive remarks towards me!"

Alus had introduced himself in kind, but the girl was only getting angrier. Just then, the chime signaling the start of class rang out.

The students that had been watching the two settled down despite the disappointing finale, and resumed their seats.

The redhead, Tesfia, was extremely reluctant to do so, but relented when Alice moved to calm her. However, even after sitting down at her seat, she continued to send angry glares at Alus.

Having gotten back his book, Alus had already put Tesfia out of his mind.

The first period teacher had them open their coursebooks, but Alus hadn't brought his. He'd only brought this one thick book with him, which he used to study in his own way. To him, a rudimentary lesson like this was just tedious.

Unfortunately, he was unable to completely block out the teacher's voice.

"Upon admission, you were given your Magicmaster license. These licenses are the same as those used by the Magicmasters serving the country, but if you pass mana through them... they show the most important thing to Magicmasters: their ranking. This is calculated by the strength of your mana, and your disposition, resulting in a number signifying your combat strength."

The teacher poured mana into the license in his hand. The distinctive light of mana was emitted, creating a three-dimensional projection in the air that displayed the figures 778/119550. However, the teacher wasn't a soldier, so technically speaking a 'Former' was attached to the number. In other words, it was the number he'd had upon retiring from the military.

As proof of that, the color of the ranking was different from the students' color. Now it was merely data that showed he was a former Magicmaster. Color was used to differentiate between student Magicmasters, retired Magicmasters and active duty Magicmasters.

"Of course, the ranking is always changing in accordance with your results in training and in missions. I'd like you all to aspire to always be raising your rank."

Magicmasters' standings were all dependent on that ranking. Because of that, the students' futures and possibilities relied heavily on their rank. Their rank was both their report card and social status in one.

The truth was that fighting against Fiends wasn't all there was to being a Magicmaster. Those who'd reached the Triple Digits like this teacher had the ability to retire from the military to serve as teachers. A lower rank often meant a lower wage and more difficulty in getting assigned to important posts. In that sense, the teacher's Triple Digit rank was enough to astonish the class. While it was a little immature to show it, it was a ranking worth speaking proudly of.

Soon enough, the class was filled with students eagerly holding their licenses in hand to check their own rankings.

But one area in the class was particularly rambunctious.

“8867th!!”

“4521st!!”

Voices of surprise were raised when they discovered four-digit rankings amongst the freshmen, who usually had five- or six-digit rankings.

“Alice and Tesfia have four digits!!”

Alice scratched her cheek in an embarrassed fashion, while Tesfia sported a triumphant expression.

Then the teacher called out to them. “This is quite a surprise this year as well. I recall that you excelled during the entrance exam, Alice. And you are from the Fable family, aren’t you, Tesfia... that explains your rank. I hear that the examiner was challenged in dealing with you two. Do continue to polish your talents without becoming conceited.”

“Thank you very much.”

“But remember that your rankings were only decided during your entrance examinations. Even if you are in the six digit rankings, there’s no need to feel disappointed. After all, you’ll be able to raise your ranking depending on your efforts. I want you to continue down the path of Magicmasters, well aware that you are the guiding lights of humanity.”

The teacher looked over the class with a satisfied smile, then cast a suspicious glance at Alus. “Hm? You there, what happened to your license?”

Being the only one not confirming his rank to the class made Alus stand out, whether he liked it or not. Pretty much all of the Institute’s students were outstanding talents that would go on to work for the survival of the human race. They were up-and-coming Magicmasters. That’s why they were all, without exception, highly ambitious honor students.

So it was only natural for somebody who sat there silently reading a book to stand out in a bad way.

All eyes in the classroom focused on Alus.

“I’m sorry. I lost it.” That was the truth. The license fundamentally also served as a money card in place of a wallet. In this day and age, it was a necessity.

But in Alus’ case, not having it didn’t hurt him in the slightest. If there was anything he needed, he only had to request it and the military would provide it; and with his extremely high wages, Alus had more money than he could spend in a lifetime.

As for his ranking, the principal had already told him to keep it confidential. And since he planned to spend the rest of his life at the Institute, he didn’t need to care about his ranking.

“I bet you’re too embarrassed to show it. Even if you have a six-digit ranking, it’s nothing to be ashamed of right now,” Tesfia loudly declared with disdain. She laughed scornfully.

Spurred on by her, the other classmates began looking down on Alus. This was the result of the fact that circles of friends had already formed in the class. When faced with the choice of siding with someone who was alienated from everyone, and someone they were at least acquainted with,

their choice was clear. Moreover, with all of them being so serious and excellent students, they didn't find Alus' flippant attitude amusing.

"Ridiculous."

"Are you a sore loser? If you're so vexed, why don't you show us your ranking?" Tesfia argued vehemently, following Alus' brush-off statement.

However, Alus knew that a higher ranking only meant you'd be assigned more dangerous missions. Since the others saw that as their reason for existence as Magicmasters, he and they would fundamentally never see eye to eye.

The newbie Magicmasters here hadn't seen Fiends and Monsters striding around in the Outer World. Double or Triple Digits were one thing, but four-digit rankings and below were powerless anywhere but on the Institute grounds.

No matter how strong they were, once they stepped outside, those who would die would die.

That was all.

A heavy sigh escaped Alus' lips. Now he'd completely lost his focus.

He could handle the teacher alone, no problem, and once done the lecture could go on without disruption, but it seemed that it was in this Tesfia girl's nature to snap at people.

Alus slammed his book shut, stood up, and started to leave the classroom.

"Wait—you!"

In contrast to the flustered teacher, Tesfia turned her back to Alus and spoke to the teacher with a triumphant expression. "Sir, dealing with an unmotivated loser like him will only be a hindrance to the lecture. So please continue."

Leaving the classroom behind, Alus headed for the library rather than his laboratory. Being in the same building as the classroom, he'd be able to spend his time there and make it back in time for second period.

As expected, the library was filled with books wherever he looked. All of these books were on magic, without a single unnecessary volume present. To Alus, it was a room full of treasure.

Of course, the unfortunate reality was that most of them would be of no use to him. In fact, it was very possible that he'd already committed all of the knowledge recorded in these books to memory. That said, it could be fun to try and see if there were any excellent finds to be had here. And because that would be a treasure, there was meaning in truly digging for the knowledge to be had in these books.

This was the perfect place for him to resolve the frustration he'd built up in class. But in the end, Alus didn't manage to find anything good.

Time flew by, and the chime signaling the end of first period mercilessly rang out before he knew it.

"I guess I'll come back later." Though unsatisfied, he reluctantly left the library behind.

The second period was training in the form of mock battles.

Everyone was changing into the Institute-specified training uniforms in the locker room... but the men's locker room was filled with sharp glances directed at Alus.

"Tsk, if you don't want to be here, then get the hell out already."

Alus could hear rude remarks like that, but he didn't feel the slightest bit of discomfort. Having served in the military since childhood and achieved more than anyone else, hostile glares like these had been an everyday occurrence for him.

Of course, as his achievements continued to pile up—and his ranking with them—the ridicule and scorn was silenced.

In the past, he had feigned calmness, but now that wasn't even part of his plan. He simply had no interest. He even felt somewhat nostalgic when bathed in that hostility and disdain. Swiftly changing his clothes, he stepped out of the locker room with a smaller book under his arm.

In the dome-shaped training grounds, any physical damage was substituted with mental damage through magic, so while fainting was a possibility, no physical harm would be done.

Mock battles were battles that made use of martial arts, weapons or magic. Your opponent in these battles was displayed on a panel in the middle of the dome.

A teacher was present, but with the Institute students being so serious and dedicated, the chances of anyone using prohibited moves or cheating was very low; and since these were merely mock battles, the teacher paid only the minimum of attention.

The teacher pushed the shuffle button. The display showed the names of all the participants that would be matched against each other at random.

Ten groups were formed to hold mock battles out of the class of 40. In order to prevent groups from coming into contact with each other, magical barriers divided up the training grounds.

Incidentally, weapons were allowed on the training grounds. Of course, these were restricted to weapons with mana applied to them. These assist weapons had their efficiency in conducting mana enhanced, and were intended to bring out the original performance of magic. These weapons were called AWR (Assist Weapon Recovery), or Aura for short.

Swords and spears made from material whose only property was their hardness were useless against Fiends with their super-hard outer shells, so no Magicmasters favored them. Those kinds of weapons were purely for use against people, and carrying one around was like announcing they were just normal civilians.

In the training grounds were all kinds of weapons prepared by the Institute. Being freshmen, very few students had their own personal Aura.

Any that did, were those who had been trained to become Magicmasters before their admission into the Institute.

Of course, Alus was one of those. But in his hands wasn't a weapon, but a book completely unrelated to the purpose of this exercise.

"That's nobility for you."

Suddenly, a voice of admiration rose from someone in one of the corners of the training grounds.

Glancing over, Alus saw Tesfia in the center of a group of students, with a single katana hanging from her thin waist.

A katana, how old-fashioned...

Even Alus, who'd seen all kinds of weapons in the military, only knew of a few Magicmasters that used a katana as their AWR. When it came to AWRs, a double-edged sword was more usable than a single-edge katana, and was becoming more commonplace.

"This weapon has been passed down in my family for generations. Since I've always used this, it's what I'm most used to." Tesfia was probably the only one on the training grounds who had her own AWR. The only one in her class, and maybe even the only one in her class year.

Students on their way to becoming full-fledged Magicmasters were going to have to discover their own magical characteristics as they kept studying, while also figuring out what kind of weapon worked best to draw out their full potential. That was why it was common to only get a personal AWR upon graduating from the Institute.

Conversely, that meant that almost all full-fledged Magicmasters had their own AWR. The role of an AWR was to assist with the conduction of mana. It enhanced the conductivity.

Rather than directly creating fire or water, passing mana through your AWR reduced leakage. Nor did you need to use an incantation to serve as the trigger each and every time.

In fact, development of the AWR began before the systemization of magic. The traditional weapons humanity had used, firearms and bladed weapons, proved completely useless against Fiends. Though they might be able to scratch their hard outer shells, they couldn't deal a fatal wound.

AWRs were created by working under the principle of how to break through the Fiends' outer shells and kill them.

At the time, an AWR simply consisted of a hard, unbreakable weapon, with its lethality increased by endowing it with mana, but modern-day AWRs had developed far beyond the originals. By engraving a blade all over with magic formulas that were created through a combination of unintelligible forgotten characters—also called Lost Spells—it was possible to use magic with the weapon as a catalyst.

Through that process, humanity succeeded in omitting the chanting step, and gained enough power to face the Fiends.

That's why, though they were Magicmasters, there were none that used wooden wands like you'd see in fairy tales, the reason being that they

weren't practical to use as weapons. AWRs prioritized magic assistance. It was difficult to engrave wands with magic formulas, further making them unsuitable.

As admiration rained down upon Tesfia, she glanced at Alus and flicked her blade with a *schhhing* sound. The blade sticking out from her scabbard was full of engraved Lost Spells.

She seemed to be provoking Alus, but he was planning on peacefully getting through this period as well. He didn't want to let go of the book he was reading for even a moment during the breaks.

Eventually the shuffle ended, and the names of his classmates that he didn't know appeared on the display one after another. First training ground, second training ground, and on the third training ground, Alus' name appeared.

Tesfia's name was listed for the eighth training ground. Fortunately, they weren't on the same training ground, but since they were close, it was clear he'd end up being compared to her by the spectators.

By looking down on him, they could reassure themselves of their own possibilities. Forming clear rankings allowed everyone to come to an understanding about who was superior.

Without grabbing a weapon, Alus headed for the third training ground, while flipping through the pages of his book.

His opponent was a boy he didn't know. He was a classmate, but Alus had no interest in him.

The boy's crude short hair was a distinctive reddish-brown, and as expected his slanted eyes filled with contempt as he looked at Alus. In his hand was a borrowed sword-type AWR.

The 20 students that were unmatched became spectators, and it was just as Alus had expected. Half of them chose to watch Tesfia's match on the eighth training ground, while the other half watched Alus' match. They were hoping that he'd eat dirt.

Usually spectators would be bustling with expectation and analysis, trying to guess who would win, but the eyes on Alus were all jeering at him. It was like a distasteful freakshow for making fun of the weak.

What to do...?

The reason for Alus pondering what to do was because he felt a particularly sharp gaze on him. Alice was among the students spectating his match, but he didn't feel it from her.

That dubious glance was glued to him, closely following his every move. While it was uncanny, Alus' worries lay elsewhere.

He had actually already given up on this match. If anything, he wanted to lose on purpose so he could get this over with quickly. Though hiding his rank was part of it, he really didn't want to waste his time.

That said, even though he wanted to lose, he had no intention of taking any damage.

He was thinking of a way to lose without taking an attack, and without letting the spectators catch on to his real objective... Deceiving the spectators and the teacher was easy for Alus, including Alice and Tesfia.

The only one who weighed on his mind was the owner of that sharp gaze.

He didn't know who it was, but their skill was probably Triple Digit level. If that was the case, they shouldn't be able to realize what Alus was doing... but he sighed at how uncomfortable it was to be watched.

"Talk about lucky. This is perfect for me to try out the fruits of my daily efforts to my heart's content. Ha, this is like going up against a punching bag," Alus' opponent said with a scoff.

One contestant had a sword AWR, while the other contestant held only a book. To the onlookers, the outcome was already determined.

The alarm rang signaling the start of the match, without giving either of them time to confirm the other party's weapon.

The male student began running. His amateurish movements were unbearable for Alus to watch. He was impressed that his opponent wasn't embarrassed to do that in front of the spectators.

It seemed like he was imbuing mana to his sword AWR, but the mana covering the sword was horribly sluggish. Not even the assist functions could help him.

Alus matched the overly slow sword speed and made it look like he had just barely dodged it in the last second. In between attacks, his eyes ran through the pages of his book as he continued his reading. In fact, he didn't even need to follow the sword with his eyes.

His opponent backed up, putting distance between them, and poured a lot of mana into his sword. Responding to that, the magic formula engraved on the blade started glowing red.

"<<*Burn Edge*>>"

Following that voice, flames wrapped around the blade.

Normally it was possible to omit the incantation, but since Alus' opponent had gone ahead and used an incantation anyways, he was either on the level of a five-digit or he was simply an idiot.

Of course, even though it could be omitted, using the magic name had the effect of helping establish the phenomenon; but the satisfied grin on the male student's face made it clear he didn't understand what he was doing. His being able to exercise power with just the magic name was all thanks to the AWR's assistance.

Doing that without assistance put you on the level of a Triple Digit. To begin with, he probably didn't even know that Burn Edge was an inferior spell. It was a simplified version of the advanced spell Flame Blade, its power being several levels below it.

Seeing his opponent look so satisfied over using something like that was pathetic to Alus, and he almost felt embarrassed for him. The spectators weren't particularly surprised, but they held their breath thinking the conclusion was near.

Passionate cheers were coming over from the eighth training ground where Tesfia was fighting.

Meanwhile, over at the third training ground, the spectators were muttering things like “almost had him” each time Alus barely dodged an attack.

There was no tension to be had here, making for a large gap between the two training grounds. Neither that large gap nor their voices even registered as noise to Alus.

Only Alice restlessly watched over the fight. Force poured into her fingers, and her firmly clasped hands seemed to be praying for Alus to stay safe. That was a glimpse of her natural kindness.

The male student’s sword harboring magic approached.

Since nothing good would come from prolonging the battle, Alus snapped his book shut, ready to finish things. He purposefully took on the sword swinging at him diagonally, but at the same time, he placed the book between his body and the blade.

The resulting shock wave kicked up a cloud of dust. When it cleared, Alus was lying face up on the ground, and the heavily breathing male student was exiting his stance.

The buzzer signaling the end of the match rang.

“—!! Mr. Alus...” Alice voiced her concern. Since she believed he’d taken the attack head on, it was only natural that she sounded so distressed.

Even seeing a lovely girl so worried for the defeated, the other students that had been looking on couldn’t restrain themselves from ridiculing the loser’s ungraceful blunder. Their expressions changed to those of contempt for the weak.

But in contrast to Alice’s worries—

“—!!”

Alus got back up as if nothing had happened, much to the surprise of everyone present. He then opened his book back up and left the training area, without taking his eyes off the pages.

Anyone who happened upon that sight would have asked themselves who the winner really was.

Noticing the spectators’ dumbfounded expressions, Alus realized that he had made a mistake ending the match too quickly. The truth was that the students were astonished by how composed Alus was, but he failed to understand that.

Alus thought to himself, how would anyone be damaged by a magic attack of that level. The best choice was to take the attack. If the fight had gone on, he might have ended up counterattacking by reflex. Trying to match the opponent’s lower level was unexpectedly difficult. The urge to continue reading had also played a part in his rush to finish the fight.

Well, while I did act like I was defeated, it’s true I didn’t pay heed to the details and pull it off perfectly. After all, this match was a complete waste of time.

Meanwhile, the dubious glance that had been on Alus vanished as soon as the battle ended.

"Are you okay, Mr. Alus? Are you hurt anywhere?" As soon as Alus reached the outer edge of the training ground, Alice came running up to him, carefully examining his body.

"You don't take any physical damage on these training grounds."

"... Ah! Right you are." The suspicious look on Alice's face told him that something was still off.

Glancing at his body, Alus realized he'd made a trivial mistake. He had of course been the one who created the shock wave just before the battle ended. That was meant to keep people from realizing that he was taking the attack on purpose, but since he hadn't wanted to dirty his clothes over a farce like this, he'd unconsciously coated his body with mana.

That said, it was nothing strange for a Magicmaster to do this. Whenever he was on a mission in the Outer World, he'd always emitted enough mana to cover his body.

As a result, despite having been covered in a cloud of dust, Alus didn't have so much as a speck on him. In the spur of the moment—"More importantly, don't you have to look after your friend?"

"Fia will be okay. She's really strong."

Fia? Alus figured that was a nickname, but since he had no interest in the ongoing battle in the eighth training ground, he turned to look at his book. Since he'd used it to block the sword in the mock battle, he checked the cover for damage. Even though he'd covered it in mana, paper was paper. Fortunately it didn't have any cuts, or even any dirt on it.

Relieved to see it undamaged, Alus switched gears. "Alice, was it? It should be your turn soon, right?"

"Yes."

Since Alus wanted to return to his own focus as soon as possible, he'd skillfully changed the topic. "I may have lost, but good luck. I hope you win."

"Of course! I won't hold back. You don't get a lot of chances as a freshman, after all. And Mr. Alus, even if you weren't hurt, don't force yourself." Alice gave him a broad smile and rolled up her sleeves, as if to say, 'leave it to me.'

He'd said things he didn't mean to her during the flow of their conversation, but he didn't want to drag this out any longer. He parted ways with Alice, and leaned against a wall near the door. It seemed he was feeling a little fatigued having spoken more than usual.

To Magicmasters, mock battles were one of the most exciting lessons. As the use of magic was forbidden outside of the training grounds, it was the perfect place to test your growth. That's why the freshman Alus, who'd already lost interest, not joining in with the rest of the spectators must have been seen by the others as a loser resigning himself to his fate.

Tesfia's battle appeared to be over, and the cheers from before had turned into praise for the victor. As Tesfia left the training ground in high spirits, Alice ran up to her and began talking about something. At the same time the edges of her lips raised, and she cast a glance towards Alus, smiling at him.

Alice then stepped into the eighth training ground. Her opponent was a male student, but gender didn't matter in a battle between Magicmasters. That was because magic skills played a much bigger part in the outcome than sheer physical strength.

Unlike the students that had watched Alus' battle to laugh at him, Alice was the definition of serious. Considering it gratitude for her worrying about him felt a little strange, but Alus devoted some of his precious time to watch her match.

Alice was holding a naginata in her hands.

That's another old-fashioned one.

However, Alice's naginata handling was a sight to behold. It wasn't that her attacks were fast, or her skills polished, but her movements were very fluent. She still had plenty of room to improve, but her switches between offense and defense were brilliant. It looked like acrobatics, but she'd refined her movements to reduce her openings as much as possible.

The naginata was something she'd borrowed from the Institute, but she wouldn't be able to handle her weapon like that if she were unused to it. Seemingly, she excelled at using long weapons like spears.

Martial arts at this level was worth seeing, but that alone wouldn't decide the outcome of a battle between Magicmasters. Magic was what would determine that.

Against Fiends in a real battle, using a technique to imbue your weapon with mana—also known as an enchantment—was effective, but fundamentally speaking it didn't compare to a direct hit from a spell.

There were also many Fiends that could reduce the damage from cuts and gashes, or even regenerate from such wounds.

When fighting Fiends, you either needed to accurately strike their weak point, their core, or destroy it entirely through a high-powered attack. In that regard, the use of magic was effective both in power and extent. The position of the core varied depending on the Fiend, so getting an accurate grasp of its location was difficult.

Alice's opponent was using a knuckle duster. It was one of the major weapons used by Magicmasters that preferred close combat. An <<*Ice Arrow*>> was created at the tip, then the arrowhead was punched and sent flying.

It was a first-rank spell that beginner Magicmasters often used—Magicmasters that had only received an elementary education. It was the first spell that was taught, and it could be used with any of the basic attributes: fire, water, ice, wind, lightning or earth.

Alice spun her naginata around. As she did, the blade began to faintly glow.

“...!”

The moment the Ice Arrow touched the naginata, it shattered into pieces. But that wasn't all. The shards of ice bounced back and assaulted the male student that had launched the attack.

He took a direct hit.

His eyes closing, he collapsed to the ground, unable even to break his fall. The match had been settled in an instant.

As with Tesfia, cheers erupted at the prowess of the class' two four-digit rankers.

Alice exited the training ground with a spring in her step, high-fiving Tesfia, as if they'd decided it beforehand.

That was <<Reflection>>... No, it was <<Reduction>>, wasn't it.

Reflection, commonly referred to as Counter, was an intermediate level spell. Reduction, which was one step higher, wasn't the kind of spell that students could use. Both belonged to the light attribute.

However, there were few who could use light attribute magic. A person's suitability for most magical attributes was acquired after birth, but the light attribute required an inborn quality. As such, there were few Magicmasters who could use it.

As for magic attributes, apart from earth, water, fire, wind, ice and lightning, there were also light and dark, which were also called elements.

There were also natures that didn't belong to any of the above.

Like what Alus had...

As the training entered the second half, it switched almost completely to self-study. It was time set aside for learning new spells, or to polish the ones you already knew. No matter how much you practiced magic, none of it would go to waste.

While there were differences between people, the mere act of repeatedly using mana increased your vessel's maximum capacity.

Mana was created endlessly within the body, but it only filled up your vessel until you reached the upper limit of your capacity. Once full, the upper limit would halt any further creation of mana. But it was possible to expand your vessel by expending and recovering mana.

While one's upper limit was what it was at birth due to individual differences, mana capacity could be increased due to the ability to expand it through training.

It was normal for freshmen students to not have clear-enough challenges for them to study on their own, so they passionately continued their mock battles even into the self-study period.

Amongst them—Alus was shamelessly indulging himself with reading.

The training grounds were pretty much uniform, with an abundant amount of dirt spread out on the ground. This was out of consideration for

Magickmasters of the earth attribute. So while it was a little dusty, it was nothing a little mana couldn't solve.

Right now, there should be no one who would bother him. They should all be too busy spectating matches or finding opponents, so the loser who had distanced himself from them should be out of sight, out of mind.

... Or at least that's what Alus thought.

"Leave him be!"

"This will be the perfect medicine for him. Hey, come with me for a minute."

Suddenly, voices. Alus looked up to see Tesfia staring down at him, with Alice trying to stop her.

Alus didn't even try to hide his fed-up expression. He put his finger in-between the pages and sighed. "You really are persistent. I wish you'd put yourself in my shoes."

"Don't dismiss lightly what you did."

"Hm? What are you talking about?"

"Wha—! I won't let you say that you've forgotten about insulting the Fable family!"

I guess something like that did happen. It had only been a few hours, but it had been something so minor that it still took Tesfia mentioning it for Alus to remember. "What about it?"

"—!! What about it, you say... Don't mess with me! You have no idea what it means to bear this name. It's not something you can brush off so easily!!"

Even with her saying that, it was Alus' true opinion, and it really was just a minor thing to him. If anything, he was more upset about her getting in the way of his reading over something like this.

Alus was starting to run out of patience. *Today is a rotten day.* He reluctantly stood up, and because of their difference in height, wound up looking down at her. "That was my bad. So just stop bothering me."

After coughing up this empty apology, his eyes returned to his book.

"Don't look down on me!!" She angrily slapped the book out of his hand and sent it flying.

The spectators turned to look in their direction, as they heard Tesfia's angry voice. They wondered what was going on, surprised by her menacing look and the seriousness of the situation.

Everyone fell silent. Even the students locked in mock battle stopped what they were doing. Getting their focus disrupted over something like this, even though they were in the middle of training, was a sign of their inexperience.

The pages of the book he'd been reading fluttered about before rolling around on the ground, collecting dirt.

"Fia!!" Alice shouted out, warning that Tesfia had crossed the line and gone too far.

Tesfia sensed the serious anger in her best friend's sharp voice, and took a step back. But her eyes still blazed with furious resentment at Alus.

Since the redheaded Tesfia was flaring up this much at Alus, she must have a lot of pride. It had only been a trivial thing to him, so he felt she was being conceited. However, it was different to her... still, that just showed how immature she was.

She had never seen a Fiend and was completely complacent about living in peace, ignorant of the noble Magicmasters that stopped the Fiends from invading. She was unaware of just how valuable and meaningful the barrier was that kept them out. She was just a child. Her nobility was immature and incomplete, as she had no idea how harsh reality actually was.

After entering the army, Alus had been subjected to hazing by adults who were one or two times his size. These adults had felt jealous or inferior and made Alus go through a trial by fire. As such, he'd acquired the mental fortitude to brush off most things. It certainly hadn't been smooth sailing for him.

But even with his self-restraint, his displeasure with Tesfia's conduct won out.

"Face me!!"

Alus felt like the situation had advanced to the point where neither side was going to back down. He slowly walked over to where his book had fallen and picked it up, wiping the dirt off of it.

This wasn't going to be settled by giving up the win like he had against the male student. Either way, he didn't intend to lose. He'd need to make things clear once and for all so she wouldn't mess with him anymore.

In the military there were methods of domination through force or fear. Those methods though tended to evoke antipathy, not to mention how barbaric it was.

There was a tendency among Magicmasters to use their ranking to determine who was superior, and look down on those below. As such, seniority was pounded into everyone to ensure that there was no effect on command.

That was something Alus could do as well. And while it wasn't something praiseworthy, he could expect it to bring success. He figured he could at least go that far.

In fact, if he didn't, he'd end up wasting a lot of the next three years dealing with unnecessary meddling and trouble.

It looked like this girl who had treated these precious pages so callously would need to be taught the value of power born from the wisdom of magic research.

Alus stroked the cover of the book with care, as he looked up at the girl who still glared at him with hostility. "After school. I'll get hold of the training grounds, so you can't complain about that."

"That's fine."

"Fia. Not you too, Mr. Alus..."

"Let's put down some conditions before a witness. It'll just be you against me. Don't bring your gaggle of fans in. Sorry, but—Alice, was it?—you'll be our witness."

"I don't mind that, but..." While it was clear from Alice's expression that she wanted to stop them, she refrained from saying anything further.

In the end, this was what they both wanted. Regardless of how it started, Alus accepted Tesfia's one-sided demands so their showdown was decided on by the consent of both parties. And because of that, Alice could only watch over them.

The option of avoiding it altogether had dwindled away. Tesfia's anger wasn't going to subside. Neither would Alus'... Difficult situations like these often led to breakdowns.

"I accept a duel after school on these training grounds. Only the three of us here will be present..."

There was still an hour left before lunch break, but Alus swiftly changed clothes and left the grounds. His destination was the principal's office.

Normally, use of the training grounds was requested by going through official procedures at the reception desk, but as Alus needed to keep his rank confidential, his circumstances were special. In order to stop any curious onlookers from attending, he needed to reserve the entire grounds.

"I don't mind, but do spare me from things developing in the worst direction possible."

"Of course. If anything, I'm offended that you'd think I'd get serious against a child."

"A child, is it... So, who's the idiot that managed to get you angry?"

Alus was treating someone his age as a child, but Sisty was painfully aware that he didn't mean it literally. The worlds the students and he lived in were different, and as such neither of them found any fault with asking the question. "I think she was called Tesfia or some such..."

"—!! That's the daughter of the Fable family!" Sisty's wide-open eyes were filled more with unease than surprise. She suppressed the urge to cradle her head. "I don't suppose... I could get you to call it off?"

"Not possible. She's the one gunning for me. If anything, I'd like you to say it to her. Besides, mock battles between students are officially recognized by the Institute. If the principal arbitrates the matter, that's only going to make things even more problematic." Driving the point home further with the principal, Alus' gaze implied that her intervention would be useless.

He then closed his eyes and let out a gloomy sigh. As Alus opened his eyes again, they were full of despondency and annoyance, showing that he'd had enough. "I'm already losing out on my precious time, so I'd like to make this the only time."

The principal seemed to have more to say as she opened her mouth, but then she resigned herself. She did add—"The Institute's training grounds aren't as effective as the military's, so do make sure you don't go too hard on her."

Physical damage taken in the training grounds was converted to mental damage, but if a Single Digit so pleased they could cause serious aftereffects even with the substitution.

"I know." With that, Alus turned to leave, but on his way out he found a convenient weapon to use for his after school duel. "Do you mind if I take this?"

"I don't, but what will you use it for?"

"For the mock battle of course... all the books I have on hand are precious, you see." As he said this, he casually grabbed an Institute pamphlet off the table. It wasn't even a centimeter thick, but that shouldn't be a problem.

"Are you sure about that...?"

"This will be enough. I know what she's capable of." Showing the pamphlet to the principal, Alus clad it in mana. The pamphlet that had been curving slightly as paper will, suddenly shot straight up and remained unmoving.

Seeing that, the principal's eyes shot open. Her anxiety eased a little. "Looks like I don't have to worry. That's the first time I've seen a mana bestowal so beautiful."

"Thank you very much. Well, as you can see, this should be more than enough."

"Very true."

The smoother the flow and conduction of mana, the more effective the power and structure of a spell. Even the most trivial of objects could become powerful weapons with perfect mana control.

So if Alus were to imbue a common sword with mana, it would be more powerful than a first-class sword. That's why limiting himself to paper should allow him to better balance the difference in strength between him and Tesfia.

That said, Alus' idea of balancing wasn't quite applicable here. In a battle, the clashing weapons' true worth was only brought out when the opponents were somewhat equal. In this case, Alus was only using a worse-performing weapon for the sake of lowering his attack power. Paper imbued with mana wouldn't be able to deal any serious damage to Tesfia's mind like the principal had worried about.

Of course, things would be different if Alus didn't use the pamphlet as a catalyst, instead hitting her with magic directly.

Alus stopped himself from saluting, but that wasn't because he was being polite, but more due to his time in the military. Instead, he bowed and took his leave. "See you."

“ ... ”

Returning to the classroom was a pain.

That wasn't because Alus was bothered by his classmates' stares, but rather because the lessons were tiresome. If attendance didn't count toward his credits, he would never so much as step foot in the classroom.

He left the building and went to his laboratory. His movements unlocking the door were smooth. It didn't take that much time either, as all he had to do was pour some mana into the panel next to it. Locking it worked the same way.

Of course, you couldn't use just any mana. Like the differences in mana capacity that people had, there existed magical information such as the arrangement of mana that differed between people, which was used to confirm their identity.

As this was something Alus used daily, the moment he touched the panel he poured enough mana to confirm his identity.

With a misshapen sandwich in his hand, Alus had a lonely—though he didn't think anything of it—lunch in his room. If he went to the cafeteria on the Institute grounds, he'd be able to enjoy a good meal, but he'd never paid it a visit. That was because he preferred to read books and rummage through documents, even while eating. Even now, he hadn't so much as cast a glance at the bread he was eating.

Suddenly, Alus recalled the dubious gaze he'd felt during his mock battle. Who was it?

Then again, it wasn't really a problem. The principal would know of anyone who was persistently observing Alus at the Institute.

Maybe it was a grudge or jealousy, but assassination or terrorism was too outlandish. And if the other party had no intent of harming him, there was no need to go out of his way to investigate. If the situation ever became urgent, he'd find out anyways. That's all it was to him.

Alus cut his thoughts short, and cast a glance at the adjoining bedroom. He could see a black attaché case in there. Inside it was his only partner that he had fought with at the frontlines.

Alus' AWR was special-made. It was a unique existence that was a result of his research, and he had added his own touch to it. Its name was Night Mist.

Having decided to retire from the frontlines, he hoped he'd never have to use it again. But the reason he'd brought it with him might not have been because he simply couldn't escape his habits developed in the military, or because it represented his precious research results.

Those were only justifications, as Alus might instinctively feel that the harsh outside world was the place where he belonged.

Fifty years had passed since the White Tower was erected, and a barrier to stop the Fiends' invasion put in place. The sky seen from inside was fake. It was a vivid blue sky every day, a filtered fake sight. That's why those who

didn't know of the outside world knew not of rain or snow. They didn't know the existence of thick clouds, nor of a sky dotted with scattered clouds.

They didn't even know the smell of greenery that the wind brought with it. All they knew was the sky with the same clouds traveling in the same direction every day.

The real world was the Outer World that the Fiends ruled.

He didn't know how many times he'd gone to the Outer World on missions.

But every time he did, he was greeted with sights that made his heart dance. This had sunk deep into Alus' mind.

Before he knew it, lunch break was over and the lessons had already started.

Alus had been so focused that he hadn't even heard the chime. Still, he wasn't in a rush as he reluctantly headed for the classroom, still holding the book he hadn't finished reading.

Having taken his time, the lecture had begun in full by the time he got there. When he entered, though it was for his own convenience, he did have enough sense not to disturb the others. He opened the door and sat down on a chair without making a sound. Though even then, a person entering in the middle of the class hour stood out.

The glances thrown at Alus were far from friendly. They were so intimidating one might even hear the clicking of tongues from them.

Alus brushed it off with a composed attitude, but he thought he heard whispers cursing him out. Maybe rumors of his quarrel with Tesfia had spread.

Tesfia's and Alice's rankings were already known throughout the Institute, which was only natural. Freshmen having four-digit rankings was more than sufficient to expect them to have a promising future.

On top of that, their looks were more than enough to call them beautiful.

It wasn't hard to imagine that their beauty only spurred the rumors on more, immediately granting them celebrity status.

The atmosphere around Tesfia was noble and attractive, her unyielding eyes were far from a flaw, and only helped to bring out her grace. Her height was on the short side, but even that added to her loveliness.

Alice's tender smile that she always showed on her face was full of affection. Meanwhile, her long slender limbs were alluring, giving off an adult charm.

Together they made for the perfect picture.

Alus, having ended up in a confrontation against them, had made an enemy of practically all the first-year students. Moreover, his attitude toward the lectures rubbed the serious students the wrong way. It didn't sit right with him, as he hadn't caused trouble for anyone.

He wasn't open-minded enough to be considerate of students whose motivation was affected by other people's attitude toward studying. It was a waste. An effort in futility.

Alus didn't concern himself with people whispering behind his back. But if it started to get in the way of his research time, he had no choice but to take action.

Even now, a crumpled scrap of paper flew past Alus.

It flew past him—because of course, he had avoided it.

Another one followed.

If this was something Tesfia had instructed people to do, he could just repay the favor after school; but the person in question was fully focused on the lecture at hand. It didn't look like Tesfia was pretending not to notice, either. Her gaze was solely on the characters projected on the display in front, and she was fervently writing them down.

While Alice had noticed what was going on, she couldn't bring herself to speak up about it.

Finding the culprit and firing back would only make the situation worse. But not even Alus was thick-skinned enough to maintain his focus despite having things thrown at him.

Even if he could, that would be a defect instead. Magicmasters required keen senses to survive on the battlefield. Missions in the Outer World lasted longer than a day. You needed to endure the fear and anxiety of Fiends attacking while you ate and slept.

Because of that, Alus' senses had been trained to the point of not missing so much as a footstep as long as he stayed focused. That's why these students were bandits stealing Alus' time.

He straightened up the first paper ball that had flown at him, tearing it into strips and crumpling them up. He then poured mana through them.

Covering an object in mana was one of the most basic techniques, but it relied heavily on one's innate disposition; and those that struggled with that at the start had a hard time moving forward. But once learned, it was like riding a bike and you wouldn't forget the trick to it.

Alus put his mind to it and covered the scrap paper in mana.

This technique was used with weapons as well. When covering an object in mana, the most important thing was to see the object as being a part of your body. Magicmasters were able to sense the mana generated inside of them. So while there were differences in skill, everyone should be able to consciously circulate mana through their body. But after the mana left the body, it became difficult to perceive.

It was possible to perceive it through the materialized phenomenon after activating a spell, but that was due to one's mana being converted through the magic formula into magic. While there was no doubt that mana passed through magical phenomena, it wasn't mana itself.

Alus could feel the rugged surface of the paper scraps, now hard as rocks in his palm. With a dull, thin membrane stretched across them, Alus

manifested a minor amount of basic wind magic at the tips of his fingers so that nobody would notice, and flicked his thumb.

The scraps looked like they flew off in random directions, but then ricocheted and struck the necks of five students.

The five that had been pegged as the culprits thanks to their whispering, trembled like they'd been shocked, and in the next moment they collapsed onto their desks all at once.

That was only on the level of a peashooter. Just some scraps of paper made a little harder, but he'd been able to knock them out by accurately targeting the neck joint.

As for power, it was on the level of a chop to the back of the neck. No external injuries, the only evidence was crumpled paper, and nobody had noticed.

Even Alice, who had anxiously been throwing glances in Alus' direction was less suspicious about how the prank had stopped and simply looked relieved. She showed no signs of having discerned the truth.

After that, Alus was able to peacefully spend the next two lectures until school ended for the day.

The five still showed no signs of waking up, but of course he hadn't killed them. By the time homeroom ended, they finally came to. All of them had confused faces, wondering why they'd fallen asleep in class as they rubbed their eyes.

But in the next moment their expressions changed. When they realized that they'd missed the entire lecture, the panic on their faces made their aspirations clear.

Then again—the moment they decided to play stupid pranks on Alus, their aspirations couldn't have been all that serious.

Finally, it was after school.

Perhaps because it was a daily routine, or maybe it was only natural, but the students that should've been making their way home all gathered around Tesfia and Alice, discussing magic.

Tesfia was the very picture of an honor student during the lectures. That's why it made sense to presume she was smart. That wasn't all, as on top of that her personality and Alice's personality also attracted everyone.

Moreover, rankings served as a clear hierarchy for these aspiring Magicmasters. While the saying "if you can't beat them, join them" may have been exaggerated, there was a tendency to follow those with a higher ranking, while working toward raising their own as much as possible.

Those seeking to become Magicmasters naturally ended up in a structure bound by ranking, so it couldn't be helped.

This time, however, the two had plans after school. "I'm sorry. We have some business to attend to," Tesfia quietly told the circle, and Alice followed with, "The teacher called for us. See you tomorrow."

Tesfia gave Alus a glance and urged him on with her eyes. Her powerful gaze seemed to be telling him not to forget their promise, but also intimidation to keep him from running away.

The students around them protested for a moment, but with a legitimate reason like the teacher calling for them, there was no one that stopped the pair.

"Can't we wait until you're finished?" The female student saying this was holding a textbook on magic basics. Her petite and adorable appearance was like that of a small cute animal, but that likely would only have an effect on the male students.

Why not just approach the teacher directly? Alus thought to himself, but that was expecting too much worldly wisdom from the Magicmaster students. The idea was to get close to these two with promising futures. Of course, there might be some who simply wanted to be friends with them, too.

"I'm really sorry. I don't know how long it will take. But I intend to finish it as soon as I can." The last part had some implications embedded in it, but only Alus and Alice noticed that. "I'll meet you tomorrow." Feeling bad about it, Tesfia gently tried to smooth things over.

Hearing that, the female student bloomed into a smile and gave her a "Thank you" as she grabbed her bag.

"Let's go, Alice."

Alice, who'd been restless the entire time, gave Tesfia a nod and sighed.

Normally, a single student wouldn't be able to reserve the entire training grounds. That's why even for Alus, this was one-time special treatment.

So there was nothing strange about the principal hiding herself in one of the second-floor corners and watching over the duel, nor was it anything for Alus to bring up. Though she may have been hiding, she was well aware that Alus had noticed.

In short, she was hiding so that Tesfia and Alice wouldn't notice.

And one more thing. Alus had a hunch about the gaze he'd felt during his mock battle. That was most likely someone working under the principal's direction.

"Does she really think I'm going to mess things up?" It didn't sit right with Alus, but he supposed that was just how influential the Fable family was.

And Tesfia's own ranking only helped back that assumption up.

A disposition towards magic wasn't necessarily tied to one's bloodline.

There were no guarantees that an excellent Magicmaster's children would be the same, and vice versa.

Some things were inherited, such as mana capacity and basic ability, but the skills for handling mana and magic were in large part formed after birth.

So it was common for children with exceptional Magicmasters as parents to receive training from early childhood, the idea being that if their vessel for mana was large, it was easier to get the know-how and skills to sink in.

On top of that, influential families had the time and funds for training, so even without an inborn sense or talents they could still raise an elite Magicmaster.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

Tesfia, having changed into her training uniform, entered the field with her katana in hand.

Alus had already changed as well. Normally there was no need to actually get changed. But if they’d gotten into yet another quarrel because of it, that would just waste even more time.

Tesfia and Alice looked around the training grounds with perplexed looks, having noticed that nobody else was around.

With all combatants present, the principal should be locking the entrances around now.

“How unusual for there to be no one around,” Tesfia mumbled to herself, unaware that Alus had reserved the entire training grounds. “Well, no matter. Let’s hurry and get started.”

Since there was no need to divvy up the training grounds, they could use all of it to their heart’s content. However, Alus didn’t think there’d be a need for that, and Tesfia seemed to be imagining herself striking him down in an instant, as she had a mocking smile on her face.

That’s when something caught her glance, and her smile turned to one of displeasure. She raised her eyebrows as she stared at Alus’ hand. Seeing the pamphlet in it, she questioned him... “What are you playing at?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You really like making fun of me...”

A flustered Alice hurried in between them and managed to make each take a few steps back.

Alus then quietly said, “I have some conditions before we start. If I win, don’t interfere with me anymore.”

“If you win. If you like, I could even look over your studies.”

“No, no need. And if you win?”

“I’ll of course have you apologize.”

“Got it.” He’d already apologized once before, but it seemed that wasn’t good enough and that he’d need to be more earnest about it.

Thanks to Alice, the loud buzzer signaling the start of the match rang out through the training grounds.

—At the same moment, Tesfia unsheathed her katana and flew straight at Alus. Compared to the male student he’d gone up against, her physical skills were far superior.

Alus rolled up the pamphlet in his hand and covered it in mana.

When evaluating Magicmasters, there are commonly used approximations of ability. One of those is the quality and degree of perfection of the AWR. The AWRs had strong connotations with being assist weapons, and they all without exception made use of rare materials, which excelled in conducting mana.

Blending those in with the core as it was being formed led to an increase in mana conductivity. On top of that, by writing magic formulas directly on the surface, AWRs could assist by allowing the immediate use of complex spells.

The surface of Alus' rolled-up paper was also covered in mana. It wasn't like other objects couldn't conduct mana; it was only harder to pass through. And since the pamphlet didn't have any magic formulas engraved on it, it wouldn't assist with the use of magic.

Another approximation was the skill used when covering an object with mana. Wrapping mana around an object like what Alus had done to the scrap papers, was fundamental for enhancing mana conductivity. And that action also led to improving the strength of a weapon.

It was possible to measure skill to a degree by observing any stagnation of the mana covering the object, the total mana around it, the state of the flow and so on.

But this was only useful up to Triple Digit Magicmasters. And Double Digits required perfect mana control.

So in this situation, since Tesfia was still in the four digits, measuring the workmanship of her mana coating was perfect to approximate her skill. Then again—Alus had already confirmed some of it during her mock battle.

Like Tesfia herself said, her katana was of really high quality. But her skill with it wasn't up to par. At her current state, the katana was a waste on her.

The way she moved her body was one thing, but her mana covering the katana was only somewhat better than the other students. Her latent mana capacity was rather high for a four-digit though. There was clearly surplus mana leaking from the katana, distorting its shape.

Double Digit Magicmasters were able to limit mana output to the bare minimum required, leaving the mana coating just barely visible, but... the only benefit of using more mana was increasing the strength of the AWR.

And since the sharpness dropped instead, she was practically putting her inexperience on display for all to see.

But worse than that, more mana than necessary was wasted.

By increasing the power, you had to accurately model the mana after the blade, or it would be unusable. As a result, though Tesfia's katana was beautiful, she was turning it into a blunt instrument. That katana of hers would be useless in the Outer World, even if it was an AWR.

"Haaaaa!!"

Alus didn't dodge the katana swinging down from above.

Immediately after, a grin appeared on Alus' face—

“—!!”

Tesfia was astonished by her blade being stopped in the middle of her attack.

As was Alice, who'd been looking on from a distance.

After all, the sharp katana had been blocked by a mere pamphlet. And instead of tearing it apart, she'd been unable to so much as put a scratch on it.

Alus waited a moment until Tesfia could return to her senses. He'd served down a punishment for her rough treatment of a book, a well of wisdom. That's why the Institute pamphlet was just right.

Quickly recovering from her shock, Tesfia leapt back and distanced herself from him. “You're kidding!! ...That's no normal paper, is it?!”

“Oh no, it is. It's an Institute pamphlet. You got one too, didn't you?”

“—!!”

Alus unrolled the pamphlet and showed it off. On the cover was a picture of the Institute's buildings.

“That's a lie! There's no way some scrap paper can block my sword!”

“Yet it did...”

As if gritting her teeth, Tesfia squeezed her katana harder. “It's not possible!”

No matter how much mana covered some paper, there was a limit to its durability; even if Alus made it harder, it would easily lose against Tesfia's katana. Though that was under the assumption that your average Magicmaster was doing it...

Just passing mana through a roll of paper was challenging. These kinds of aberrant skills were a sign of Alus' Single Digit Magicmaster status, but Tesfia quickly came at him again, dragging her katana behind her. However, no matter how many times she swung her blade, every swing was blocked by the pamphlet in Alus' hand.

She swung down from above one last time—

“...”

Alus secretly let out a sigh in his mind. Despite being at such close quarters, Tesfia was unleashing wide swing after wide swing. There should be a limit to how many openings she could have...

And Alus wasn't patient enough to wait for her attack.

“—!”

His pamphlet powerfully struck Tesfia's cheek.

A loud sound slashed through the tense air, filling the training grounds. Based on the difference in sound, that wasn't a slap from a paper roll but more like the impact from a blunt weapon.

After a momentary pause, Tesfia was sent flying off to the side as if she'd been run over, rolling across the ground before collapsing. Her red hair was sprawled across the ground.

“Fia!!” Seeing Tesfia roll like that caused Alice to instinctively raise her voice.

That wasn't the force of a rolled-up pamphlet. Even taking the training grounds' damage substitution into account, it was a strike equal to one you'd use against a Fiend.

Which was why it was more than enough to send Tesfia's small body flying.

Having been watching objectively, Alice was convinced that it wasn't a magical attack. There'd been no incantation, and no sign of any mana flow. Yet a roll of paper didn't have anywhere near the strength to easily send a person flying through the air.

Alus felt some guilt in hitting a woman's face. But on the training grounds that was all turned into mental damage, so there would be no injuries or marks.

Most importantly, there was practically no difference in power between men and women looking to become Magicmasters.

As he'd faced her, acknowledging that she was a Magicmaster, while Alus might have held back because her skills were below his, he didn't treat her any differently because of her gender.

A short silence ensued. As Alice started to run over to her friend—

Tesfia's hand shook a little. She slowly raised her head and feebly stood up. Using her katana to support herself, she rubbed her cheek while staring in amazement. She probably still hadn't grasped the situation.

Alice seemed to be perplexed by what had happened to send Tesfia flying. "Are you okay, Fia?"

"...Y-Yes." While she'd grandly soared through the sky, she shouldn't have taken any physical damage. In the end it was just a roll of paper, even with mana coating it, there was a limit to its power.

Remembering that she was in the middle of fighting Alus, Tesfia glared at him and spoke in an angry tone: "What did you do?"

"I only hit you with this."

"Don't try to fool me, that didn't feel like paper. It was like I was hit by something hard..." Tesfia stroked her cheek again, remembering the sensation and seething with anger.

Magicmasters were able to perceive mana as light. As such, Tesfia's katana also had a faint light, showing mana was passing through it.

The pamphlet also had mana covering it, which was why it had blocked the attack, and had normally unthinkable power behind it.

But to Tesfia, it was only natural that it'd look like mere paper. In fact, it did just look like a normal pamphlet.

Alus had used his overwhelming technique to maximize the efficiency of his enchantment.

Four-digit Magicmasters were one thing, but it was still too much for a freshman like her, so she couldn't be blamed for not noticing.

And since he had only enchanted it the moment before it came into contact with his opponent, to onlookers the rolled-up paper looked like a

hard rock completely rejecting the sharp blade. It was an exquisite performance made possible by the vast difference in skill.

"Maybe you'd figure it out if you'd have read that book you slapped out of my hands," Alus said accusingly. The book Tesfia had hit was the fruit of labor born from the long years of ceaseless efforts by researchers. Desecrating the wisdom that could be gleaned from it was a matter of morals to Magicmasters.

"Kuh..."

"So are you going to give up?"

"I don't know what you did, but don't get full of yourself because you managed to get a hit in."

"Fia! Isn't that enough?" Alice tried to pacify her, but as expected, Tesfia didn't seem to care. As if linked to her anger, the mana overflowing from her body increased.

"What are you saying, Alice, he only managed to hit me through luck... I'm going to defeat him right now." Tesfia took a deep breath and thrust the katana in front of her. Using two of her fingers, she stroked across the length of the blade. The magic formula characters engraved in the sword began to light up from where she'd stroked them.

"Fia, that's going too far!" Alice must have guessed what Tesfia was doing. But her shouts didn't reach her, as Tesfia's fingers went all the way to the tip of the blade.

Tesfia quietly turned the edge horizontally, gathering mana throughout it. It coursed through her body into the AWR, gradually creating some light. The mana that was gathering residual mana from the surroundings into a single point was already bringing about a spell activation phenomenon.

A massive lump of ice was created in the air, with a crackling noise.

And when Tesfia slightly swung her katana down, the surface of the ice broke, revealing a large and transparent ice sword.

<<*Icicle Sword*>>

As the unique names of spells were recorded in an encyclopedia, that name was already well known to Alus. But since it was an old-fashioned spell not really suited for combat, this was the first time he'd seen it up close.

Another reason why he hadn't seen it was because this was part of the Fable family's forte, and also because it was a traditional spell.

"That's amazing." Alus didn't just praise the skill in creating the block of ice, but also the shaping of the ice sword. In practical terms they were naïve forms, with wasted parts standing out like sore thumbs, but they also had a mysterious attraction that charmed those who saw them.

To someone like Alus who used magic for the sake of lethality, it was like he was bearing witness to the original beauty of magic.

Most of all, considering it wasn't the kind of magic an ordinary freshman could use, he gave Tesfia a straightforward compliment. Though it remained

unclear if she'd heard him, as she wordlessly swung her katana all the way down.

In response, the ice sword rapidly accelerated straight towards Alus. While it was fast, it still looked like a sluggish, simple attack to him. So dodging it was easy.

Alus only had a single goal in this duel-like mock battle. That was less to keep Tesfia from interfering with him, and more to retaliate against her for her desecration of humanity's precious wisdom. Well, from his point of view.

This was most likely the strongest spell she could use. As proof of that, she had a pained expression, and her shoulders were trembling from the large amount of mana she had used.

Alus boldly faced the attack. It wasn't even a gamble. That was just how feeble the attack was to him.

"No! Look out!" Alice screamed, with a pale face. Seeing Tesfia's reckless attack as a danger to Alus, she seemed to be chanting a barrier spell, but she didn't have anywhere near enough time.

Freshmen weren't that used to chanting, what with the popularity of AWR and their omittance of incantations... but halfway through her incantation Alice abruptly stopped, emitting a loud scream as Tesfia's attack was about to hit Alus.

Alus expelled some air from his lungs. He focused his mind on his knife-hand.

Its form was a sharp blade. Strong steel capable of cutting through anything. The mana covering the hand began to slightly increase, forming a short blade of mana.

The steadily flowing mana had created a sharp mana blade.

The clash lasted for an instant. Alice turned away, while Tesfia had an expression that seemed regretful for going too far, as well as resigned to see things through to the end.

However, the outcome the girls expected didn't happen.

A moment later, Alice opened her eyes. Not because she'd prepared herself to see the worst possible outcome, but rather due to hearing an unthinkable smashing sound.

Alus was still standing with a cool look on his face, perfectly safe. And behind him was the ice sword, cleanly cut in half and reflecting the ambient light. With the mana composing the sword cut apart, the sword was unable to maintain its shape and began to crack with a snapping sound.

The sound grew louder as the cracks ran across the sword, until they reached the end. The sword didn't shatter, but rather dispersed into mana.

"—!! No way..." Tesfia let out an astounded gasp, while Alice stared on in confusion as she let out a sigh of relief.



What did Alus do? Sisty was probably the only one that understood it.

Normally, mana was only the source required for using magic. Putting the mana itself to use required something far beyond common sense.

Most Magicmasters fixated on the world as they saw it, and tended to balk at creating something new. Since scholars existed as well as Magicmasters, this offered a great excuse for Magicmasters who saw defeating Fiends as their job and who considered devising the magic for it the job of the scholars. Any phenomenon a Magicmaster came across that they didn't understand, they could leave to the scholars to figure out.

What Alus had done was a delicate manipulation of mana.

Fundamentally, it worked on the same principle as coating a weapon with mana, which involved imbuing the physical form of the weapon to give it a sharper edge and stronger durability. By making the mana independent of the object it covered, it was possible to form a mana blade.

Generally speaking—that was a contradiction. But that's where a loophole made possible by Alus came into play.

Realistically, it was impossible to use affinity-based mana on organic matter to create a mana blade. But hidden within the process was the wisdom of negating mana.

In other words, this was how it worked. First, one temporarily impaired the properties of the mana covering the object by overlaying it with more mana. By doing that, the underlying mana lost its property of being absorbed by organic material and became inorganic residue.

In a way, it was a technique to change the nature of mana, the rest being just general application of enchantments, covering the now inorganic residue of the first layer of mana with mana form.

That's all it was... and yet...

That required command over the mana generated within, and enough mana control skills to casually and freely control it at will.

And Alus was likely the only one capable of that. After all, it wasn't based on the common concept of how to use mana. For most people, mana was seen only as the energy required to use magic. As a result, it was normal for them to devote themselves to the mastery of magic itself.

That's why the girls couldn't understand what happened.

In the midst of the silence, Alus walked up to Tesfia without a trace of aggression or fighting spirit.

Tesfia still failed to understand what had happened to her. She hurriedly readied herself at Alus' approach.

But there was no tension in the air, no hostility coming from him.

Tesfia's body stilled. She closed her eyes as Alus raised his arm.

The pamphlet in Alus' left hand gently struck Tesfia's shoulder.

The battle was over.

Alus didn't really have any intention of knocking her around. All he wanted to do was teach her about reality and destroy her pride. That's why his finishing move was a gentle one. "I'm sorry."

"—!!" Taken aback by Alus' sudden apology, Tesfia was so surprised she was at a loss for words.

Alus wasn't admitting defeat. He was simply apologizing. Tesfia understood the outcome of their match better than anyone. That's why he didn't need to make it clear, and say it out loud.

"It wasn't like I was trying to insult you, but I'm sorry if it sounded like it." Alus bowed to Tesfia, giving her an earnest apology.

While he meant to fix any misunderstandings with this, Alus also had an ulterior motive. He hoped everything would be resolved with this. Tesfia had the apology she wanted, and Alus wouldn't have her interfering with him any further at the cheap cost of some pride.

They'd each achieved their demands, so now they had settled things without any future problems.

"... R-Really? I'm sorry for getting so worked up, too," Tesfia apologized, a surprised expression still on her face.

While she had a headstrong side to her, it seemed Tesfia also had a solid understanding and grace to her, too. That's why she apologized despite the unsatisfying ending.

"Then, I'll take my leave here."

"Wai..."

Alus moved past Tesfia, but as he did, she grabbed hold of his sleeve. He reluctantly turned to face her, an annoyed expression on his face. "What?"

"... How did you do it?" Tesfia meekly asked, with her face turned away.

It was an unspoken agreement between Magicmasters not to pry into each other's mysteries and specialties, even if they were classmates. Tesfia's knowledge of her own novice status made her ask timidly.

Alice, equally curious, had come closer so that she too could hear Alus' answer, quietly perking up her ears.

Alus tried shaking off Tesfia's hand with a couple of light shaking moves, but she must've been holding on tight as her hand didn't budge. Not sure what to do, Alus glanced toward the seats in the corner.

He didn't have high hopes, but this wasn't something he could decide on his own. If he revealed the trick to his technique, the girls might pry into his rank.

Fortunately, Sisty understood the circumstances. In the next moment she revealed her presence in a nonchalant fashion, clapping her hands in praise.

Tesfia and Alice looked over at Sisty. "Principal Nexophia!"

Sisty ceased her applause and easily jumped down from the seats, from several stories up. Just before she landed, she gradually slowed down her fall, making it look like she was floating for a moment before touching down.

"That's the Fable family's daughter for you! What a high-level mock battle you've shown me."

While Sisty was now the principal of the Institute, her personal history was something everyone who aimed to become a Magicmaster looked up to. However, Alus was unable to read her true intentions and so he stared at her dubiously.

Principal Sisty seemingly pushed aside Alus' reaction, stepping forward as if to say 'leave this to me,' while telling Tesfia, "To think you'd be able to use such a high-level spell as a freshman."

"... Thank you very much. But why are you here?" Tesfia's bitter expression at being defeated turned to glee at being praised by a former Single Digit Magicmaster.

"That's because Alus asked me to reserve the training grounds. And I came to observe."

"—Hey!" Alus panicked for a moment as his secret was revealed.

Now the two girls were staring at him, as was Sisty.

"Alus Reigin, wasn't it? Who are you? You even sliced my Icicle Sword in half like it was nothing..."

"That sort of thing is no trouble for him. I came here to observe because I was worried about you," the principal told Tesfia, with a radiant smile.

Remembering Sisty's look from before, Alus decided to leave it to her. Besides, it was the Institute that had asked him to keep his rank confidential. He himself wasn't all that fixated on it. As long as he could secure time for himself...

However, the conversation appeared to be heading in a turbulent direction.

"What do you mean?!" Tesfia was closing in on the heart of the matter, and Alice came up next to her. This was the question they were both wondering about.

"Well, it would be faster for you to see it with your own eyes." The principal turned to Alus, and pulled out a card.

"A license?"

"Yes. This arrived from the military this morning with instructions to hand it over to Alus."

"..."

Alice had realized what the card was, and had asked a question she already knew the answer to. But the principal's statement made her and Tesfia wonder where the military came into this.

Alus, on the other hand, had an idea as to the principal's intentions. That's why he wasn't particularly surprised when her finger touched the rank on his card as she handed it over.

"—!!"

Pure mana light leaked from the card, forming a holographic screen in the air. Displayed on the screen were the numbers... 1/119550.

"No way!!"

“—!!” Tesfia let out a yelp of surprise. Alice couldn’t even make a sound.
“Do you understand now?”

“... Eh? ... He’s...? But...” Tesfia pointed at Alus with a trembling finger, while staring at the principal.

Out of all the Magicmasters, numbering more than 100,000, he was only one of nine Single Digits.

And the greatest of them all, at that. The current No. 1 of all the Magicmasters.

It wasn’t strange that Tesfia’s words turned into a groan.

“Haha... that’s an interesting reaction. I was surprised when I saw his profile, too. And his achievements.” Sisty acted bright and cheerful, but she couldn’t help but feel depressed when she remembered it. She easily imagined the heavy responsibility on his shoulders, and his solitude. It was no doubt a harsh fate. She felt her chest tighten when she thought about it.

“Eh, but we’re the same age...” Tesfia’s finger was still pointed at Alus’ face.

Generally, Magicmasters didn’t get into the details of learning magic until they entered the Institute. Of course, elite nobility like Tesfia were exceptions to that.

As for Alus, he was an exception among exceptions. Even the fastest-advancing Magicmasters usually only awakened to their true potential after graduation.

There was no way a Single Digit Magicmaster would be the same age as her. This was what showed on Tesfia’s face. Yet the No. 1 on the license had an overwhelming presence, and with the principal’s affirmation there remained no room for doubt.

Alice, in contrast to Tesfia who was at a loss for words, had managed to calm down a little.

Alus didn’t want to brag, but he was curious at Alice’s reaction and asked her, “Alice, you don’t seem too surprised.”

“... Ah. Yes! What might it be...” Her response was full of respect, and she sounded more than surprised enough.

Where did that friendly tone of hers go... “You don’t have to be so humble, that would only trouble me.”

“... O-Okay.” Her cheeks turned red as her expression eased up a bit, but she still seemed a little stiff.

“Alus is an exception. I don’t know what the cause of this quarrel was, but he’s achieved a lot at the frontlines... So his values might be too different from yours.”

As the principal said this, Tesfia looked at Alus suspiciously, and with scorn in her eyes. Her doubtful stare pierced him.

Her attitude towards Alus, who ranked higher than the principal, probably wasn’t just because she’d hated him up to a moment ago. But Alus decided to leave it be, figuring this was a typical attitude for Tesfia.

He turned to Sisty. "More importantly, I believe you were the one who told me to keep my rank confidential."

"I changed my mind. I felt like we could tell these two. This might be some twist of fate."

So Alus' question of why was clear now. It was Sisty's whim.

"Make sure you don't reveal this to the other students or teachers, you two. I'd rather not hand down punishment to Institute students."

"... Yes."

"I understand."

There was a strange threat mixed in there. Tesfia answered the principal in a still-unsatisfied tone, while Alice mechanically nodded, her answer immediate.

Having received their word, Sisty turned to Alus. "For what reason are you doing research?" The question seemed sudden, but her tone made it sound like she already knew the answer. Her goal appeared to be to have Alus say it himself, so the two girls could hear.

"Because I want to take it easy."

"...!!" The two had stupefied looks on their faces, while Sisty sighed as if she'd expected as much. Alus' accomplishments were abnormal even if you didn't take his age into account. Sisty was, of course, aware of that. In the modern era, where 16 year-olds were treated as adults, Alus just happened to be 16. And it was common for Magicmasters to be considered full-fledged professionals upon graduation from the Institute.

In other words, Alus had been thrown out into the Outer World where the Fiends ran rampant while still only a child in the eyes of society. There was no way that *wasn't* abnormal.

In the minds of the military's top brass, protecting humanity's domain from the Fiends and reclaiming lost territory was always the top priority. There was no leeway for letting a powerful Magicmaster play around.

Alus and his overwhelming talent for magic had gotten him quickly thrown into live combat. His achievements were the result of that, and, Sisty felt, his request to retire was the inevitable consequence. When she received the military's instructions to enroll Alus in the Institute, she'd also received secret directions that went against those received from another source.

Using humanity's sake as a justification—those directions were to have Alus return to the battlefield at a point in the future.

Sisty had slammed her fist on her desk in anger when she received these secret directions.

Her Institute had produced countless excellent Magicmasters who were used to relieve the Magicmasters on the frontlines, yet the pigheaded top brass relied on a single overly-superb Magicmaster.

Of course—it was because of him that many of her former students hadn't been thrust as often into hostile lands, and that the general Magicmaster death toll had dropped.

Sisty felt unbearable, complex feelings in this matter. She understood Alus' desire, the super-clever freshman's plan to put the adults to shame.

So she temporarily put aside the military's secret directions. Wrapping her arms around Alus from behind, pressing her body into his body, she whispered something in his ear.

Sisty had created this sensational-looking sight on her own accord, though Alus was unmoved. He heard the sweet voice whispering in his ear, but he simply looked off into the distance, indifferent to her charms.

Of course, Tesfia and Alice didn't have the courage to intervene between two Single Digit Magicmasters, mostly out of respect for the principal.

Sisty's whisper said the following: "Then, won't you be able to take it easier if you don't just focus on your research, but... also make these two stronger?"

Alus smiled bitterly. This was the real reason Sisty had revealed his rank to them.

Of course, Sisty had her own self-interest at heart as well. No matter how promising Tesfia and Alice were, they wouldn't be able to replace Alus. If the army insisted on eventually bringing Alus back to the frontlines, then cultivating bonds so he would have more of a reason to fight wasn't a bad idea.

Sisty had her own reasons for empathizing with Alus. When still in the military, eight years ago... she'd met a young Alus. But it seemed he didn't remember, and she didn't see the need to remind him. After all, it probably wasn't a good memory for him.

Alus glanced at Tesfia and Alice. Like Sisty said, they might have exceptional talent, even among all the Institute students. They might not be able to win against third-years close to graduation, but they could put up a good fight.

However... "No can do. Training these girls won't help me to take it easy."

"But that's only if they live their lives as normal and go on to graduate."

"... What do you want me to do?" No matter what Sisty suggested, Alus was sure it would only chip away at his research time, yet he chose to listen. Because there was still a faint chance he'd be able to take it easy.

"Why don't you try guiding them so that they can fight in actual combat?"

"Not possible. I don't have the knowledge to pull that off." He wasn't being modest. He'd never taught anyone anything.

But Sisty insisted otherwise. "Don't worry. When it comes to combat skill, there's no one that compares to you." Along with her sweet smell, Sisty's bewitching lips came closer to Alus' ear, and she tightened her arms around him.

Tesfia and Alice, looking on, blushed a little at the somewhat immoral scene.

It wasn't forced, but there was an irresistible will behind it.

"If the time between my research sessions would work..." Alus reluctantly yielded. If he ignored the principal, who was the highest authority at the Institute, he might end up losing even more time than this.

Besides, it might not be so troublesome after all... Alice was one thing, but Alus' wishful thought was that Tesfia wasn't the kind of girl that could honestly ask him to teach her.

"I thought you might say that." The arms that held him finally let him go.

Through this exchange, a clear hierarchy had been established for Alus' time at the Institute. *I guess Sisty's age-changing abilities aren't just for show.* Alus realized Sisty was a step or two ahead of him when it came to bargaining. Thanks to her, Alus' condition of Tesfia not interfering with him anymore was practically guaranteed.

"Can I go now?" Having been defeated in this, Alus wanted to leave as soon as possible. He also wanted to avoid losing even more research time.

"For now, yes."

"... For now, is it." Alus was fed up with the thought of more trouble, but he returned the rolled-up pamphlet to Sisty and began walking toward the training grounds exit.

As he passed Tesfia and Alice, the two looked his way with great interest.

Tesfia opened her mouth, seemingly about to say something, but in the end she said nothing. Quietly, but so the principal could hear, she muttered to herself, "What is this world coming to if that's No. 1?" On top of that, Alus had retreated from the frontlines for the purpose of taking it easy. She found that unforgivable.

—In that instant, she winced as something assaulted her body. A freezing killing intent was directed her way.

It was Sisty who was directing it.

A small bit of the former Single Digit Magicmaster Witch's power had assaulted Tesfia.

Alus could feel the killing intent directed at the girls behind him. He found it immature, but kept walking.

The two girls remained behind. Alice felt as much dread as Tesfia, to the point that she couldn't look the principal in the eye.

Tesfia got that she'd angered the principal, but didn't understand the cause. Or, it was more accurate to say that fear had stopped her head from working properly.

"He's gone through a lot, too." Sisty, after a small sigh, broke the tense air. She smiled wryly at Tesfia and Alice. "If you two are looking to reach the top of the Magicmasters, you should ask him for advice. I've already told him, so don't hold back."

"—!!" Tesfia was surprised, but couldn't really rejoice either. She still didn't understand his greatness. And that killing intent from before—she actually considered the principal to be more amazing.

Alice, on the other hand, was enthusiastic. "Eh?! Can we really?"

“—!! But Alice, he’d be the one teaching us!”

“Isn’t it amazing though? We’d be the only ones taught by the strongest Magicmaster.”

It was an unbelievable stroke of luck, being able to receive guidance from the top of the Magicmaster world. It was rare even to be taught by a Double Digit Magicmaster. Even getting close to a Double Digit was difficult, unless you joined the army and became strong enough to fight by their side.

“That’s true, but...” There was still a part of Tesfia that couldn’t accept reality. She was aiming for a high rank so as not to bring shame to her family name. While she’d never dreamed she could become a Single Digit, she’d at least wanted a ranking close to a Double Digit.

It was the perfect chance, but it didn’t sit right with her. Though Alus was a Single Digit Magicmaster, because of their heated argument Tesfia still couldn’t imagine herself being his student.

“I won’t force you. But there would certainly be things you could gain by having him teach you.” Sisty saw Tesfia’s easy-to-read expression, admonishing her like a child.

“Can’t you be the one to teach us instead, Principal Sisty?” Tesfia asked, making it clear this was her foremost wish. Of course, Sisty was the principal, so Tesfia didn’t really think it was possible. The principal had asked her to turn to Alus for guidance because Alus was a fellow student.

“I’m a busy person, you know. And even if I were to listen to your request, I can’t just give you favorable treatment.”

“Yes... of course.” As Tesfia already knew she’d say that, she didn’t say anything else.

* * *

Alus quickly returned to his reading upon arriving back at his room.

He’d planned on devoting himself to his research and regain the time he’d lost, but couldn’t get into it. That was because of the principal telling him to teach those two girls how to fight.

Alus wasn’t enthusiastic about the suggestion. In fact, he disliked it and felt uneasy. Even if he were to try to instruct them, there wasn’t much he could do.

The most effective way to train Magicmasters was to have them fight Fiends. That’s how it had been for himself, after all.

It was common for Magicmasters to get trampled on by the abnormal Fiends without being able to lift a finger, no matter what kind of powerful magic they used. There were a lot of Magicmasters, but fewer than half showed true guts by not backing down in their first battle against a Fiend.

Fear of death was an emotion that got in the way of using magic. Magicmasters needed to stay calm in any circumstance. As long as they believed in their possibilities, there would be hope regardless of how desperate their situation was.

True despair came from not being able to believe in yourself. In those cases, Magicmasters wouldn't be able to make use of their greatest weapon—magic. That was the inexperience, or rather the fault, with those Magicmasters.

Alus believed they could refine their abilities if they improved their magic skills, but that point of view didn't allow for a person's mental aptitude for being a Magicmaster.

He hated himself for making a promise without considering it first. Although it was too late for it now, he couldn't imagine that he'd be able to take it easier while training the girls.

"What do I do?" He figured Tesfia wouldn't come beg him to teach her, but Alice on the other hand almost certainly would. It was an extremely troublesome situation for him.

The next morning, Alus was greeted with the same suspicious looks as yesterday when he'd entered the classroom. The chatter he heard before opening the door turned into silence.

The hostile glares mostly came from the other male students. That just meant that the female students had a clearer view of what to prioritize. This kind of difference between men and women was noticeable in the behavior on the frontlines, too. But those differences were better for lacking the harassment factor.

Alus, of course, ignored that Tesfia's glance was among the ones directed his way. That there was no hostility in her gaze was a more than good enough result. But he also felt a kind of expectation mixed in there. He had a bad feeling about it, but decided to dismiss it as his imagination.

Anyway, as one not to shrink from people's stares, Alus got to studying. Nearly all of today's subjects were standard lectures. None of the subjects interested him, so he participated as little as possible.

Third period. The lecture before lunch.

If Alus had to say it was better or worse, he'd clearly call it for worse. Because somehow, all of his lectures were the same ones that Tesfia and Alice had.

Alus wondered where Tesfia's honor student behavior had gone. She kept glancing at him, despite being several rows ahead of where he sat in the corner of the furthest row. It was happening so often that Alus was getting annoyed by it.

"Hey!"

Unfortunately, Alus' call out to Tesfia got picked up by the teacher's sharp ears, who misinterpreted it as a reaction to a class question.

A chain of misfortune ensued.

"You're... you're Alus, was it... I see, I see." The teacher looked down at his register, taking a brief pause before continuing, "Then how about you answer this question." He pointed out the liquid crystal display.

Alus could tell it was a lecture on Fiends based on the abnormal appearance on the screen, but he hadn't been listening to the lecture. He needed to surmise the question based on the flow and what the point of the question was.

However, it was still just a lecture on the basics. With Alus' wealth of knowledge, there was no way it could be a challenging question for him. From what he could tell, it was a lecture on the Fiends' origin and the threat they posed.

Alus put a bookmark in the book he'd been reading and stood up. "Fiends suddenly appeared around 100 years ago. There are theories as to their origin, but with humanity so cornered, our current technology and knowledge aren't enough to be able to draw conclusions. However, the technology of the time was unable to stop the Fiends' advance, and it wasn't until the deployment of magic in the military that we could successfully obstruct them. Fiends are rated based on their strength and how much of a threat they pose, with eight classes ranging from F to SS. A sighting of an SS-class Fiend has only been confirmed once, 50 years ago."

Alus wasn't sure what the question had been, but seeing as how this was an elementary lecture, this answer should be enough. He tried to sit back down.

However, the teacher seemed dissatisfied with the answer. "That's insufficient to answer the question."

The liquid crystal display changed, showing several types of Fiends. The caption read, "Subjugation," revealing the footage's theme.

A sigh escaped Alus' lips. Here he'd gone and lowered the level of his answer to match the elementary level of the lecture...

The teacher was feeling a sense of rivalry, probably fueled by envy in regards to Alus' mysterious treatment, and he'd already forgotten about using questions and answers to guide the students. If anything, that whip of malice he called a teacher's pointer was swung down solely on Alus.

"Depending on the class, the army divides Magicmasters into subjugation squads and dispatches them. Squads are normally formed of four or more. This is the smallest number of people needed to maintain a formation in case of an unexpected event. Against A-class Fiends, squads are mostly composed of Double Digits; for B- and C-class, Triple Digits make up the main force with a Double Digit captain for the most part. For Fiends ranked below that, Triple Digit Magicmasters and below are most commonly assigned."

Alus' already hostile tone had now completely lost all the formalities typical of a student-teacher relationship.

The students were left behind and dumbfounded. They all turned to look at Alus.

The teacher ground his teeth. His cheek twitched. "Then answer what the procedure is to request a Single Digit Magicmaster." Considering his

desperate expression, the teacher was either trying to protect his pride as a teacher, or trying to satisfy himself by driving Alus into a corner.

Information regarding Single Digits was confidential and kept from the public. There was no way a student should be able to know the answer.

But it wasn't the kind of question to pose to an active duty Single Digit.

Tesfia cast an interested glance Alus' way, while Alice had her whole body turned his way, eager to hear his answer.

"The nine Single Digits have the same rank as a general, and the Governor-General is the one with authority over them. Normally, they are assigned S-class Fiends and above, but if there are no orders they can move around freely. They are also referred to as a commando unit. A difference between them and ordinary Magicmasters is that their missions are primarily not the extermination of non-essential Fiends, but the reclamation and expansion of a nation's domain."

Seeing as how the teacher's jaw was practically touching the floor, there was no doubt that Alus' explanation had completely stunned him.

Alus turned to look at the screen showing the differently-classed Fiends. "Returning to the topic at hand... Fiends become stronger by eating mana. That's why they target humans. As Fiends also have an organ that generates mana like humans, cannibalism amongst themselves isn't unusual. I mentioned there were eight classes, but there is also a special type of Variant class. This is when two or more Fiends merge, or more rarely when a Fiend cannibalizes another Fiend or eats a human. It's difficult to give them an accurate class, and their class is estimated by summing up the classes of the individual specimens. So unfortunate events such as letting a Fiend escape, only to find them again after they've become stronger, is something that happens from time to time."

Then Alus let something unnecessary slip.

"Because of that, even low-classed Fiends can reach a higher class through repeated cannibalism or other methods. And high-classed Fiends will stop being on guard against the barrier. The Fiends' advance is currently being obstructed by the barrier deployed by Babel in the center of the seven nations, but scholars believe that the barrier's overall potency is weakening every year..."

After saying this and looking around, Alus noticed that everyone was intently listening to him. And he realized that if he said any more, he'd end up talking about top secrets even the teacher had no idea of. "Is that enough, sir?"

"... Y-Yes. Take a seat."

Alus feigned calm and silently sat back down.

He could hear curious conversations going on around him.

That was right. Babel's barrier, responsible for stopping the Fiends' advance, was growing weaker with each passing year.

It was said that the reason was the barrier had to be expanded to cover the regained territories, with the result being the overall strength of the barrier weakened as the area it covered increased.

In the past, weak Fiends hadn't even tried to approach the seven nations' territories, but that trend was gradually starting to change. In parts of the barrier that were especially weak, even B-class Fiends had managed to invade.

This was something only a few in the military knew.

Of course, all the Magicmasters had noticed the increased number of missions to deal with invading Fiends, but none of them speculated aloud about it.

Alus had ended up divulging that information, but since his rank was confidential, his remarks would be brushed off as the idle gossip of a freshman student.

There were now, however, some that knew Alus' position... and Tesfia's and Alice's faces had gone pale. They'd stopped glancing his way.

Alus cursed himself for letting something like that slip, but since it had freed him from their staring, he decided to let it be.

However...

Once the lecture ended, when lunch time began, Tesfia ran up to him. She forcibly pulled at his arm and dragged him up to the roof, with Alice following closely behind them.

From an onlooker's perspective, a man and two women running off like that looked as though it might develop into something indecent... but since two of the three were Tesfia and Alus, most of their classmates figured it was just more quarreling.

Fortunately, since classes were just ending, there was no one on the roof.

Tesfia flung the door open and pushed Alus onto the roof. Though it might not have been their intention, the way Tesfia and Alice stood at the door blocked his escape.

Tesfia said, "What do you mean by what you said before?"

"What are you talking about?"

She showed no signs of apologizing for rudely forcing him onto the roof, but Alus wasn't particularly offended by this. He'd already resigned himself for something like this when he'd let the matter slip.

"About Babel's barrier weakening."

"Did I say something like that?" He felt a light headache coming on when he realized he'd have to pay for his blunder, but he gave feigning ignorance a try. In fact, it was the only choice he had left.

"You did!!"

All he could do was shrug at Tesfia's assertion.

"Mr. Alus, is it true?"

"So what about it? It has nothing to do with you two." He tried to make it ambiguous, but that only confirmed it in Alice's mind.

Alice looked at him with a sorrowful face. The wind rustled her chestnut-colored hair as she took a step forward to make her determination clear. "It does have something to do with us. We're striving to become Magicmasters to fight against Fiends too... so don't say something so sad," she boldly said, with grim resolution.

But those were just the words of someone who still hadn't come face to face with the unknown. It was a hollow sentiment, not backed up by substance.

But it was too late to smooth things over now.

"Again, so what. It's not something the likes of you can do anything about right now."

"That's true, but..."

Alus' retort was harsh, but if he didn't go that far she'd only keep hanging on. He had said 'the likes of you,' but now that they knew his abilities they weren't going to argue with him about it.

They had no choice but to calmly accept the difference in ability between them, and grit their teeth over the unfavorable reality.

"You're wrong!!" Tesfia rejected Alus' statement.

She wasn't being rash and emotional like yesterday. Instead, she was refuting his way of thinking with earnest eyes. "If there's no time, then leisurely spending the next three years at this Institute is something to be ashamed of. Shouldn't we be prepared to fight at a moment's notice?"

Her red hair glowed in the sun, and her eyes shone with seriousness.

While Alus thought she was being unreasonable, he found her appearance refreshing.

But when she followed this up by thrusting her finger at him, as if to say 'how about that,' Alus smiled wryly at her haughtiness. The deep impression he'd received for a moment disappeared, leaving behind what was merely a very competitive girl.

When you thought about it, the fact that she said that meant that she indeed had been spending her time in a leisurely fashion. Of course, if she had the skills to back it up he wouldn't have anything to complain about.

While he made fun of her in his mind for being a mere student who'd never even seen a Fiend, her self-awareness was worthy of praise. It was worthy of praise, but—

"That's why you'll train us to fight against the Fiends."

"No way," Alus immediately refused.

"—!!"

It was only obvious, looking at it objectively, that he'd refuse considering the way she was acting wasn't the way you asked for a favor.

However, to Tesfia, that way of asking was the result of her clashing with her pride, and ultimately bearing the shame of it. That's why she never expected she'd be rejected.

The way she was rendered speechless, with her eyes darting around, was the very definition of flabbergasted. She was completely dumbfounded and rendered spiritless.

"Mr. Alus, please."

"... I'll think about it. The principal did ask me, after all."

"—!! Hey!" Since Alice had asked, and Alus' answer left room for consideration for *her*, Tesfia returned to her senses and fiercely protested, "Why is it okay if Alice asks you?!"

"I don't care if you're nobility or what, but that's not how you ask someone for a favor."

"Urk..."

It appeared Tesfia was unable to offer a rebuttal after Alus' perfectly valid point. Fortunately it didn't look like she was going to condemn him for insulting nobility again. As proof of that, Tesfia seemed like she wanted to say something, but swallowed her words.

"To begin with, devoting time on the likes of you would be a waste."

Even though these two were undoubtedly the top rankers in their class year, they still couldn't say anything back to a Single Digit Magicmaster.

"... But the principal said that you would take care of us!"

"..." Alice gave Alus 'puppy eyes.' Those clear eyes fluttered with enthusiasm and expectation, giving off a dazzling light. The look invited compassion while at the same time being strangely meek. It was a little unfair.

And she did have a point. Sisty had indeed asked him, and Alus had also given her a somewhat affirmative answer.

Maybe I was being too hasty, Alus thought to himself, while shaking his head. "She did say that... I think... well, fine, and what about you?"

"Eh?!"

He'd heard Alice's intentions, and the principal *had* asked him. But the red-haired girl was still sulking and pouting, so he demanded a redo from her.

Tesfia straightened her posture, a beat off. Her glance drifted away from Alus, possibly compromising her pride as she began to blush. After putting a hand on her chest and exhaling, she put one of her legs back and lowered her head. "Can you please teach me..." She then raised her chin, turning on 'puppy eyes' and blinking repeatedly.

"..." Alus looked her over blankly. What an obvious act, it was clearly a rehash of Alice's successful ask.

After several seconds of silence, Tesfia's mental fatigue, or sense of shame seemed to get to her as she turned her face away and started blushing again. Her lips trembled, like she was just barely holding back a storm of complaints.

Meanwhile Alice had decided to keep quiet, scratching her cheek with a wry smile.

"That's some prideful humility there," Alus said sarcastically, seeing her put on such an obvious display of humility she couldn't possibly be sincere about.

Tesfia reacted sharply, quickly shooting a hateful glare at him from the shame she was feeling.

But as Alus saw the beginnings of tears forming in her eyes, he decided to help her. "I was joking..."

"Y-You really are the..."

"Well, I did say I'd take care of you, but I will prioritize my own research. There's no guarantee that you two will become useful Magicmasters."

"Wha..."

Alus' one-sided manner of speaking must have sounded horrible to the two girls striving to become Magicmasters.

Alice let out an awkward sigh and scratched her cheek, but the unyielding Tesfia obviously wasn't going to be able to accept it. Or rather, if she didn't say something back and vent her frustrations, her red face would never return to normal.

"You can't tell until we try. Maybe we'll become strong enough to be able to fight side by side with you." Her tone was meek, and she showed no signs of flaring up like before.



Alus figured she'd learned at least that much. "That's not what I meant. You two are considered excellent, right?"

While they still had reservations, this completely unexpected praise coming from Alus momentarily put a surprised expression on their faces.

"... O-Of course," Tesfia responded, putting on as much of a face as she could.

Normally, this was where she would confidently declare as much, but with the Magicmaster before her being No. 1 himself, nobody could blame her for faltering.

But Alus sighed, and corrected the misunderstanding. "That's not what I meant. There's no guarantee that all excellent Magicmasters will be useful in battle. You two have never seen Fiends, right?"

His tone of voice wasn't looking down on them. Neither was he flaunting his own power. If anything, it was more the tone of someone older speaking to children, with some caution mixed in.

While the two should have seen Fiends in their classroom material, that wasn't what Alus meant. The two obviously knew that, and nodded their heads. That was only natural.

It wasn't just the two of them, either. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say none of the Institute's students had. Alus was saying they were still inexperienced. He believed that you weren't a full-fledged Magicmaster until at the very least you had completely dispatched a Fiend.

In fact, that was the junction at which you could tell if a person would be useful or not as a Magicmaster. A mountain all Magicmasters crossed.

That wasn't all there was to a Magicmaster, but Alus left that aside for now and continued, "There are those who can't use magic when faced with a Fiend. If that happens, it will be very difficult for that Magicmaster to step out into the Outer World. So even if I go forward with your training, and your ranks increase a little, there's no telling if it will actually lead to something."

"Hmph... that's not a problem. If anything, that's something we'll find out when we try."

Tesfia shrugged the matter off, but based on Alus' experience that was the kind of person that was useless in live combat, and he gave her a cynical look. He didn't say anything out loud because he didn't want to repeat the same mistake as before.

People accepted things differently. Alice, unlike Tesfia, accepted Alus' words as those of the No. 1 Magicmaster with a meek look on her face.

Someone like Tesfia who underestimated their opponent was a problem. And nothing could be gained when acting timid before a battle even started, like Alice. It wasn't a matter of one being better than the other, but Alus believed the former was more likely to die early.

"We're going to start today."

Alus' light headache took a turn for the worse as Tesfia took control. Not even the dignity of being ranked No. 1 stood a chance. Of course, this was just limited to Tesfia.

My time...

Suddenly, Tesfia showed hesitation, mumbling "Alus and Alice..." She began talking to herself, ruminating over something. "... It's too confusing."

What's this redhead saying? Alus thought to himself, as a serious urge to hurry back to the classroom began to bubble up inside him. But with the girls in front of the door, his escape route was blocked off. Which was why he silently waited for her to continue.

"It's too confusing, so change your name."

This out-of-the-blue order was given to him, from someone who'd known him for two days.

This suggestion left even Alice dumbfounded, and her jaw went slack before turning to a bitter smile. Finally, she gave Alus an apologetic look, as if to say she was used to her best friend's pushiness.

Even if all logic was disregarded, Alice should be the one changing her name, not him. *Or I'd like to say, but this isn't the time for that. In fact, why do I have to get involved in something this illogical,* Alus thought to himself as a fed-up feeling washed over him. "Keep talking."

Just answering Tesfia felt like a waste... but saying so would upset her. Or perhaps not, as she put her finger on her chin and said, "Then how about Al? You're Alus, so... Al."

"How am I even supposed to answer that?" Alus struggled to respond to a nickname he'd never been called before. When he'd been in the army, there was a period when they called him by his number, but he'd been called by his name far more.

No, there was one who'd casually called him something like that...

Alice, in contrast to the confused Alus, looked happy. "Yes, that's good. Mr. Al sounds more approachable."

"Then it's decided." The surprising suggestion somehow received approval after Alice got involved. It seemed Alus' own will and assent were completely unnecessary for the decision.

However, Alice's "Mr." was something that he couldn't overlook, so he decided to straighten that out. "Alice, you don't need to add a Mr. to my name. I'm not adding a Ms. to yours."

"That's true, it does feel a little formal." As a smile broke out on Alice's face, any stiffness from yesterday disappeared.

"Al, huh..." Alus moved his mouth, but he wasn't sure if his voice came out. The only thing he was sure of was that Tesfia and Alice hadn't heard him. It was just one fewer syllable, yet it sounded completely different and left him with a strange sensation. It was an emotion he hadn't felt before, almost vexing or ticklish.

Maybe it was because they were his age. Either way, he wasn't feeling any strong feelings of rejection towards it. At most, he felt a silly concern over his dignity as No. 1 seemingly dissipating.

As a result, Tesfia and Alice were likely the only ones who felt relieved and refreshed by that.

"Ah!! We have to hurry back!!"

It didn't feel like that much time had passed, but Tesfia shouted this out, then quickly rushed and put her hand on the door knob before turning back to Alus. "T-Thank you, Al... sorry for taking your time." Her words of gratitude sounded far from happy.

Well, that would probably improve with more experience, but if she was going to feel embarrassed about a nickname she came up with herself, she shouldn't have said anything to begin with... Alus exasperatingly thought to himself.

But as he was thinking that, Tesfia had already gone through the door.

And before Alice followed her, she politely bowed to Alus with a face full of joy. "Thank you, see you after school, Al!"

"What are you doing, Alice! If you don't hurry, lunch time will be over."

Alice responded to Tesfia's voice on the other side of the door with an "I'm coming," and left the roof.

Leaving just Alus behind. "Talk about self-centered," he muttered to himself.

Of course, those words were directed toward Tesfia. She'd forced him up on the roof, and as soon as she was done she just left him behind. Someone looking on might misinterpret the situation as Alus being rejected by Tesfia and Alice.

It was a little while longer until Alus thought of returning to the classroom for lunch.

"... I guess I'll go to the cafeteria today." His resigned voice had a hint of mental fatigue mixed in with it. Something that a lunch meal couldn't fix might have been building in him.

But he ran out of luck on the route he'd chosen to avoid any attention.

Alus had decided to pass down the second floor hallway near the faculty's research lab, commonly used only by the staff.

"Sir, about your lecture on Fiends..." The voice of a girl he'd heard only moments ago reached his ear.

With the door ajar, her voice reached well into the hallway. The image of a passionate honor student popped into Alus' mind. These were things Alus already knew, and she could have just asked him, but he was a student and had different responsibilities from a teacher.

Well, it couldn't be helped. In fact, just hearing it made him want to grumble a little.

Alus passed by without stopping, simply glancing into the laboratory. There he saw the small girl with the red hair, opening a text with both hands. Her tone was enthusiastic as always, and her eyes were serious.

Geez, how eager...

As he thought this, it occurred to him that he might have to revise his opinion of her.

In the end, she was immature and inflexible, and she was trying to be sincere toward herself while her pride as a noble and her face as an honor student weighed her down.

She was, in her way—upright, pure and innocent because of it.

Alus was further along than the path, but he felt like he shouldn't get in the way of a young sprout being raised. Though, that was a way of thinking that didn't match his age. He even felt old, thinking it.

As someone who'd only lived for 16 years, he was too young to have that state of mind.

"I believe you touched on this during the lecture, but there's something I didn't understand about the A-class. What I'm curious about, is this text that mentions 'mitosis'..."

"Ah, yes, about the clones produced through asexual reproduction..."

Alus didn't stay to listen. He walked away with a wry smile as the teacher seemed hesitant to speak.

It was a matter related to the origin of Fiends, in other words, embryology. And when it came to clone technology, which humanity was unable to perfect, there was no way a teacher would be able to answer. If he could, it would answer multiple mysteries around the Fiends. It would result in humanity's knowledge of the Fiends dramatically improving.

But that question born from pure doubt made Alus question her sense.

Even if she kindly received an explanation from the teacher, she most likely wouldn't understand any of it.

Alus continued to head straight for the cafeteria, but when he got there...

"It sure is crowded." But turning back immediately upon arriving felt like too much of a waste. While he winced at the congestion, he chose to endure it and line up for the sake of future reference.

The cafeteria was like a food market, with famous food companies lined up next to each other, including plenty of well-known restaurants fit for the prestigious Second Magical Institute.

Alus felt he was wasting his time, but he still ran his eyes across the multiple menus on the illuminated board. Fundamentally he only needed to get nutrition, but with so many choices he wasn't sure what to choose.

After deciding on the daily lunch special, Alus' turn was up. A tidy old lady was at the counter wearing a triangular bandana and an apron, with a broad smile on her face.

"I'll have the daily lunch special."

The old lady had a dubious look in her eyes as she held her hand out.

"What?"

"Where's your meal ticket? ... Is this your first time?"

"That's right."

After nodding understandingly, the clerk pointed with her thumb, as if to say 'Over there.' In that direction was a meal ticket vending machine, with yet another line of people.

Catching her drift, Alus left the counter with his head hanging low. A bothered expression appeared on his face at the thought of lining up again.

In the military cafeterias, all you had to do was bring a tray and the food would be put on top. But it seemed an ordinary institute was different.

As the afternoon lectures were quickly approaching, Alus reached the vending machine, but then he frowned in confusion. The vending machine was filled to the brim with touch panel buttons. Just searching for the daily lunch special was a pain.

"Pfft, just having a lot of choices isn't all that great... hm?"

Perplexingly enough, no matter how many times he pushed the button, no meal ticket came out. Having waited this long, with his frustration piling up, Alus felt irritation building inside.

For some reason, the people around him looked at him like he was a country bumpkin. Some even seemed to be sneering at him.

He didn't care about that, but with this being the result of his efforts, the edge of his mouth twitched. And his index finger was already folded into his fist.

"H-Hey! What are you doing?"

"Hm? Why are you here?"

When Alus turned around, he saw the redheaded girl he'd passed by earlier. And she looked somewhat dumbfounded.

"I give up. Just how much attention are you trying to attract to yourself, acting this way in front of so many people?"

"What am I supposed to do? This thing broke just as it became my turn."

"Move over."

Looking down at Tesfia cutting through the line, Alus shuffled to the side.

Keeping a good distance from Alus, she put her hands on her knees and bent over as she looked at the vending machine.

She had long eyelashes, fine skin and a straight nose. Objectively, her attractiveness as a woman stood out. But Alus still felt a measure of doubt.

Just then, Tesfia, perhaps feeling his gaze, cautioned him with a whisper: "The principal told you not to attract any unnecessary attention to protect your secret, right?" After that, she turned back to the vending machine as if she had no choice.

Seeing Tesfia examine the machine, the show appeared to be over as the ridiculing stares disappeared. However, there were of course no error messages.

After a few seconds, Tesfia let out a sigh. "Have you never used a vending machine before?"

"I know of them, but I've never actually used one. To think I'd get rejected on my first attempt..."

"Geez, have you been living under a rock?"

As Tesfia said that, she pointed at the 'Inserted Balance' message in the corner of the screen. "Were you planning on eating without paying?" She sounded amused over Alus' behavior, as much as she also sounded astonished.

However—

"Huh? You're telling me this place is trying to charge me?"

"Hey!!" Tesfia pulled at his sleeve and forced him down. She then crouched down to the same level, putting her hand around her mouth. "Are you insane? All of these are high quality restaurants, of course they won't feed you for free! If you want to eat, you pay. That's common sense here. Even if you don't have the money in hand, you can use your money card nowadays. Over here, see?" She explained all of this as if warning a child.

"I'm not walking around with my license."

"Huh? Have you never bought anything on the Institute grounds?"

"Of course I have. But I've never used money for food. Besides, I was planning on throwing my license in the trash when I entered the Institute."

Hearing Alus' erratic remark, Tesfia glanced around their surroundings. Fortunately, it appeared no one was eavesdropping on them.

And of course, they wouldn't. In another universe, Alus might have been a six- or seven-digit. And faced with that kind of result, Tesfia might understand that someone would want to throw their license away out of sheer disappointment.

No, she wouldn't be able to understand that either.

Most importantly, he'd received his license from the principal. She didn't know if he'd thrown it away again, but it was hard to imagine that someone who would throw out something so valuable would normally be walking around with it.

"Which means..."

"I don't even have a penny."

"Of course not..."

Tesfia had expected as much, but hearing Alus say it out loud made her shoulders slump. She then pulled out her license from her pocket and frowned for a moment, before pressing it against the vending machine's sensor. "Urk...?!" A bitter yelp escaped her throat.

After that, her shoulders sank even lower. "What are you having?"

Her yelp must have been from seeing the remaining balance, and Alus recalled seeing people in the military reacting the same way over their account balances. "What about you? Didn't you come here to eat?"

"I'm over there. I had Alice buy something for me to take to the classroom, so I'd like to hurry this up already." Tesfia was probably on her

own because she had a question for the teacher. She pointed in the direction of a somewhat cheap kiosk among the large number of lavish shops. It looked like the kind of kiosk where the financially troubled students would eat.

"Aren't you nobility? Surely you're not strapped for lunch money?" Alus blurted out reflexively, before cursing himself inside. It was the truth that he didn't have a high opinion of nobility. But considering Tesfia's pride, his remark was probably unwise.

He'd already gathered enough attention with the vending machine trouble. But contrary to his expectations, Tesfia's reaction was calm. "Hmph, of course not. I asked my mother the impossible to be allowed to enter the Institute. She's already paying for the tuition, so I'm doing the rest by myself."

Her words sounded rebellious, but her tone wasn't harsh. She had accepted her situation as a result of her own choice. All while wearing a smile.

She wasn't putting it on, either. She was doing the best she could by her own strength, so she could honestly praise herself.

Alus felt like he had seen an unexpected side to Tesfia. That said, he wasn't the sort to be reserved. "All right, then I'll borrow lunch from you. Also, I might as well eat at the kiosk too."

"It's fine. I'm just repaying the favor..."

After whispering this, Tesfia suddenly put on a serious expression before continuing, sounding somewhat mortified, "The truth is that... I know. You were holding back during the mock battle, right?"

"Hm? No, that's—" Alus began, then his look turned sullen at the unexpected topic.

In contrast, Tesfia smiled broadly. "I'm still a four-digit, after all. Well, I couldn't tell right away, but after taking the time to think about it..."

"—I see. Sorry."

It wasn't anything he had to apologize for, but Alus felt strangely restless.

"Well, if you don't like it, why don't you think of it as my tuition fee for your lessons?"

"Hmm..."

Alus considered the suggestion for a moment. It did sound reasonable as a point of compromise, but normally the tuition fees for lessons under the currently-ranked No. 1 were far higher than a lunch.

However, he could consider it an investment in her faint future prospects. Alus had a bad habit of always viewing these sorts of things in a calculative fashion. After forcibly convincing himself, he accepted her suggestion. "Then that's what I'll do."

He figured there was no need to respond to her goodwill with cynicism.

As he did, he headed for the kiosk, following Tesfia's small back some steps ahead of him as a guide. While gazing at her bouncing ponytail, he thought to himself that she sure was sincere despite being out of money.

When he thought like that, he could no longer feel that prickly side of her coming from her petite frame.

Meanwhile, Tesfia stopped dead in her tracks. "What?" She turned around and her suspicious glance showed clear distrust, though her movement was timid and awkward.

"What do you mean, what?"

"... If there's something you want to say, just say it. You've been staring at me." Apparently she'd been keenly aware of Alus' glance.

In fact, there was something he'd thought of while looking at her. "Well..." Alus hesitated for a moment, but the suspicion in Tesfia's eyes didn't disappear. If anything, it just got stronger.

But Alus' next words brought about an unexpected situation, despite him not meaning much by it. He put his hand on his chin and spoke what was on his mind. "When I look at you, you're pretty cute. You're just naturally beautiful and you look like you'd be popular with the guys... is what... I was thinking."

Tesfia's shoulders trembled, and she spun around as if to run away instead of waiting to hear all of what he had to say.

That was right—compared to most girls, there was a clear difference between her beauty and theirs. That much was obvious from the looks she was getting from those around. Even her unyielding eyes were adorable.

Of course, that was just a general evaluation and not something Alus himself was particularly aware of. And that's why he didn't understand the looks of envy he was getting from the male students.

That was most likely because Alus, having grown up in the Outer World, didn't feel any attraction to the beauty of an untouchable jewel. But he did feel his heart being cleansed by her naïve and innocent smile. That's why he'd so casually mentioned it.

There hadn't been any deeper meaning lying under it; it was just something that had come out of his mouth.

Their surroundings had unexpectedly become quiet. Likely because they had heard what Alus said. As the cafeteria that had been full of hustle and bustle was now silent, Alus' voice reached all the way to the hallway.

"Wha—! W-W-W-What are you saying...?" Tesfia's voice was feeble, her back still turned to Alus.

Seeing that, Alus spoke in a puzzled tone. "Hey, what now." He walked past her and looked back. As he did, he saw her pushing her license against her chest to calm her racing heart. Her face was visibly red, her eyes cast down and her lips were trembling. "If we don't hurry, lunch time's going to end."

"S-Shut up!! ... Idiot... This is your fault..." Tesfia muttered, while quickly walking up to the kiosk and wordlessly picking up some food. Next, she put her license down, saying, "Here you go, Ma'am," and paid the bill.

"Hey, my food..."

Tesfia had already finished her transaction, so Alus' voice was in vain.

The next moment... "Fia, hey!" A voice called out from afar, perhaps having gotten tired of waiting.

Looking in that direction, Alus could see Alice waving her hand with a bright smile. "Oh, looks like your friend's here—Hey?" Alus tried to peek at her face again.

But her body jumped like a jack-in-the-box.

He had no idea what she was thinking, but after her jump she ran over towards Alice. Tesfia's face was beet red, but Alus had no way of knowing that.

"Uhm, so what should I do?" He scratched his cheek with a puzzled look as he stared at the redhead bouncing away.

In the end, with no choice but to chase after her, Alus had lunch with a suspiciously-behaving Tesfia and a confused Alice who watched over her.

* * *

After school that very day, Alus ended up looking after the two excellent novices.

It need not be said that this threw a wrench in Alus' plans.

He had already braced himself to sacrifice his sleeping hours to make up for it. That said, with the events that happened at lunch, it wasn't all that hard to change gears. He'd expected something like this, which was why he'd skipped class for the fifth and sixth period.

Spending the time effectively and stopping at a good spot, Alus rummaged through the luggage he'd brought with him when he moved in. "I'm sure I brought it with me...!!"

In front of him was a case big enough to fit a person in. When he moved to the Institute, he had forcibly stuffed it with his personal articles. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything in it that would interest boys and girls of his age.

But it might have been a mountain of treasure to those deeply involved in magic.

In reality, as Alus had always been in the military, he'd never had the time to devote to fashion, hobbies or other recreations. Then again, he didn't have the disposition to enjoy hobbies or amusements.

Getting the rank of No. 1 wasn't something done haphazardly. He couldn't spend time on a bunch of hobbies just because he had the talent.

Eventually, Alus found what he was looking for. It was lying deep in the case, sticking out like a sore thumb. Some people might even call it trash.

It looked like your average piece of wood. But its surface was different.

If it had just been a piece of bark, it would've been one thing; but nobody sane would want to touch this.

“Bringing this with me was the right choice.”

This was something he’d used during training in the military. It wasn’t something the military had supplied, but a personal belonging. It wasn’t made out of wood, nor was it something as simple as a training weapon.

After all, the material used was part of a Fiend (Variant, estimated A-class) called Salqueroit that Alus had killed.

Alus had had it specially made, with the Fiend’s shell as the main component. It also had the effect of disrupting mana. More accurately, when it sensed mana it rapidly oscillated and dispersed it.

Either way, this would be useful for Tesfia’s and Alice’s training; and most of all, Alus wouldn’t have to waste his precious time in the meantime.

It would be an irresponsible training menu, but the two would just have to deal with that as something inevitable.

The chime, signaling the end of today’s merciless onslaught of lectures, rang out.

But all the students were ambitious. The lectures might have been over, but only a few students went home right away.

Many students gathered at the training grounds after school. Yesterday, it had been reserved for three students—plus one person—but usually it was a hot spot for the students regardless of their class year.

Of course, if one didn’t reserve a spot ahead of time, there would be no free space. Also, the third years close to graduation were prioritized in reservations. The reason so many lowerclassmen watched them was to study their techniques in their mock battles.

As such, it was unavoidable that freshmen made up most of the spectators.

Tesfia and Alice were convinced that Alus’ training would take place at the training grounds, which was why they headed straight there. However, the grounds were already full of upperclassmen.

“Huh?!”

The two had already changed into their training uniforms. But upon seeing the packed-full training grounds, they almost dropped their AWRs in sheer disappointment.

At the same time, they were bombarded with stares. Though it was unclear if it was due to the upperclassmen being smitten by the two beautiful girls, or if they were being looked down on for arriving late. Regardless, most of the students stopped what they were doing as the two girls arrived.

“That guy didn’t run off, did he?!”

“I don’t think he would. And now that I think about it—we didn’t really decide on a location.”

Tesfia was suspicious, though Alice calmed her down with sound reasoning. But even Alice couldn’t help but smile bitterly at how Tesfia called the No. 1 Magicmaster ‘that guy.’ She figured Tesfia was embarrassed about using his nickname.

Well, if it wasn't for what happened between Tesfia and Alus, Tesfia might have shown more respect and used his proper name.

Of course, Alice didn't know what had gone down at the cafeteria.

"Then where is he?!"

"..." Alice didn't have the answer to that question, so all she could do was tilt her head questioningly.

A while later, the two arrived at a new building that had been constructed on some spare space on the Institute's vast grounds this year. It wasn't far from the main buildings, and seemed to be intended for a newly-appointed faculty member. As a result, with so few teachers present, it wasn't a place that students would approach. And it took quite some time until the two reached the building's top floor.

It had been harder than they would've thought to track Alus down. Leaving the training grounds, they'd headed to the men's dorm and asked for Alus Reigin's room number at the desk. They were told there was no such student in the dorm.

After walking around for a while, they passed by the principal's office, realizing they could just ask Principal Sisty.

The principal was taken aback by them not even knocking before entering her office, but it was probably inevitable, though Tesfia doing something that rash was unbefitting of nobility.

Principal Sisty could more or less guess their circumstances, and didn't admonish them. If they had been anyone other than Tesfia and Alice, the outcome likely would've been different. To maintain order in the Institute, she would have grilled them thoroughly... or so she wanted to believe.

The two were finally told where Alus was, and hurriedly left the principal's office, unaware of Sisty fondly gazing after them.

"Is this really the place?" Tesfia asked Alice. It was a rhetorical question. After all, no one could mistake the place the principal had told them about.

The top floor of the building was an entire floor made for just one person.

There was a cutting-edge security door, but they didn't feel any heavy or oppressive atmosphere. If anything, it felt abnormally simple. The panel to the side of the normal-looking door was obviously a security lock. It worked by putting your palm over the panel, which then read your mana information. And the door would only open to authorized users.

Tesfia pushed the doorbell.

Shortly thereafter, the door slowly slid open. While the door looked plain, it was as thick as a person's hand.

The two timidly peeked inside, and saw machines and tools they'd never seen before. In contrast to the room's brand-new look, they smelled mold. Looking closer, they saw small piles of books so old they would never be placed on a shelf. The walls were white, and looked like they were glowing.

"Tsk, so you're already here."

Tesfia and Alice heard a tongue-click from somewhere. They looked around, but couldn't find Alus.

Upon closer inspection, they saw that the room was four times as large as a regular classroom that could fit 40 students. The size was abnormal in and of itself; after all, it was much too big for one person's use. Even the piles of books and the machinery only took up half the space.

Eventually, they found the owner of the voice, beyond all the things that were in the way.

By that time, Tesfia's anger had dissipated somewhat. Instead, a question popped into her head, which she rudely threw at Alus. "What's with this place?"

Alus was seated on a special-order recliner, behind a massive desk that looked as expensive as the principal's desk. If someone who didn't know Alus' ranking saw his treatment, they would have complained. In fact, some teachers had already complained to the principal, so Alus gave the two girls, who knew his circumstances, a curt description. "... It's my laboratory, so what? Well, that and my private room."

He tilted his head, wondering why she was asking the obvious.

"Why is it just you... even I have to live in the dorm."

The laboratory was huge, but Alus' bedroom wasn't all that different from your average dorm room. The kitchen was very advanced, but as Alus was the opposite of a gourmet, it was completely wasted on him.

That said, the main point of Tesfia's complaint was that Alus was the only one not living in a dormitory.

"Tesfia, Mr. Al is..." Alice interjected, speaking up for him and trying to make Tesfia understand the hierarchy in play.

"It's only natural. Considering my achievements, even this is shoddy."

"Grr..." As expected, Tesfia was at a loss for words. She didn't exactly know what his achievements were, but she could surmise they were greater than she could imagine, considering his ranking.

"Anyway, Al, we were sure the lessons would be held at the training grounds." Pressed for time, Alice returned to the main topic.

They had changed back into their regular uniforms by now. Since Alus was in his own room, he didn't have to mind the time; but it was frowned upon to keep a girl in your room late into the night. It was bad to earn that kind of reputation at the Institute.

"She's right. How long do you think we were looking for you? If you say now that the training will start tomorrow, I won't forgive you." Tesfia clenched her fist tightly, as if to retaliate against him for verbally cornering her. It didn't work as a threat against Alus, but it was true that over an hour had passed since the last lecture of the day.

Considering the season, it was still bright out... but since Tesfia lived in a dorm, Alus figured she had a curfew. "I know," he said, while looking about as if searching for something.

Suddenly, Tesfia's and Alice's expressions changed. Finally... lessons from the strongest active-duty Magicmaster. It made their hearts pound, and their expectations made them grasp their AWRs even harder.

"Put those dangerous-looking things away. What are you planning to do in my laboratory?"

"What!!" Both girls had stupefied voices, seeing Alus holding a strange stick, and having no clue what he was planning.

Alus tried to ensure they were all on the same page. "I'm only going to be teaching you techniques for fighting Fiends. Well, your ranks may rise as a result, but if that's all you want then you'd be better off training on your own." These were his final words. The only choice he was giving them was whether they would do it or not.

"Huh?" Tesfia had been the one who brought up fighting Fiends, but she appeared disappointed upon hearing she'd be better off training on her own if she wanted to raise her rank. "!!"

Alus instinctively smacked Tesfia across the head with the piece of wood in his hand. "Are you an idiot? ... For starters, what do you think are the components for estimating a person's rank?" This was a question that had even been in a lecture, so...

"I believe it was mana capacity, how many high difficult spells you can use, the number of defeated Fiends, and the number of completed missions!"

The question was much too simple to determine if someone was excellent or not, but Alus still gave it a passing grade.

Alice added to Tesfia's answer. "The class of the defeated Fiends is also taken into consideration."

With that, they'd covered everything they'd been taught in class. "Well, that's about right. But it's not enough."

The two girls thought back to what they'd been taught, then looked at Alus questioningly.

It couldn't be helped. No lecture would have touched on Alus' additional supplementary information. "You're right in respect to the subject. Then, what do you think you should stress to raise your rank?"

Tesfia immediately answered, "Mana capacity and the number of spells you can use." Her overwhelming confidence could be heard in her voice.

"I think so too..." Alice, meanwhile, suspected there was more to the question, and gave a more timid answer. In her mind, she was probably saying to herself, 'but that's probably not it.'

Alus sighed at the predictable answer. He'd at least wanted them to guess that he didn't want such a simple answer. Well, if they'd gotten it right the first time he wouldn't be able to go on as smoothly...

He was confirming what level Tesfia, the so-called honor student, was at. In that sense, Tesfia's reaction didn't betray his expectations. From their statements, Alus could tell that Tesfia was straightforward and simple, and

that Alice was more careful and capable in terms of getting a better read on things.

But in Alice's case, while she could presume things, she couldn't effectively use her hunches and so it still wasn't at a usable level.

"That's wrong. The defeat of Fiends and their class is the most important point."

"...!!"

Tesfia was shocked, but Alice wasn't as surprised. That meant she had felt that her answer probably wasn't correct.

"The number of Fiends is stressed, yes, but there's only so far you can go by defeating small fries. In short, defeating high-classed Fiends will have the biggest impact on your rank."

"But then we won't be able to raise our rank!"

"While it's not completely impossible, you still won't be able to catch up to the Magicmasters who are out in the field."

But that was why their rank was so excellent. Without any defeated Fiends taken into account, earning that ranking from pure mana capacity and magic ability showed that they had the potential for greatness in the future.

That was partly why Alus had listened to Sisty. This was just how hopeful Alus, or rather Sisty, was for them. "That's why the techniques to kill Fiends will lead to raising your rank in the future. But if you'd rather quit so you can just focus on raising your ranking right now, I wouldn't mind in the slightest. If anything, I'd love it if you did."

Tesfia's rebellious spirit had gotten stirred up, but Alice was motivated, and Alus was planning on watching over them. In which case, there wasn't much difference between one person or two people.

"Bring it on then. If our ranks go up as a result, then there's no problem." Tesfia was still fixated on ranking. Alice, on the other hand, looked somewhat concerned.

The Magicmasters participating in combat in the military weren't too mindful of their ranking. Of course, a higher rank meant more pay and better treatment, and most of all—a high ranking was a great honor.

But in return, the high-ranking Magicmasters were assigned to more dangerous missions. Considering humanity's hopes and wishes, they may have rejoiced. But to Alus, it simply meant being in a hurry to die.

Though with Alus being assigned to the elimination of high-classed Fiends, no other high-ranking Magicmasters should have been given reckless missions.

But these were Alus' values, and he wasn't going to push those onto Tesfia and Alice. It wasn't his business, so in short, it was their responsibility. He wasn't going to interfere in their way of life and say something unnecessary.

As Alice nodded in agreement, Alus continued with his explanation.

Third Chapter: A Silver-Colored Chance Meeting

Alus focused on the stick in his hand.

Tesfia and Alice also fixed their gazes on it. In reality, this was the first time they'd seen Alus' magic, but for Alus, it just reminded him of the daily training he used to do every morning.

He covered the stick in mana in an instant, as naturally as breathing. It was truly magnificent. Then again, Alus wasn't intending to show off; he wasn't going to tell them 'this is what imbuing with mana is.'

The two girls' eyes opened wide. It was an understandable reaction.

Alus didn't know how skilled Alice was at enchanting, but he'd clearly shown Tesfia that they were on different levels.

The two pushed their faces closer to the stick, completely transfixed to the point of forgetting to blink.

"What is this!"

"It's beautiful!"

The surface had been covered in a very thin layer, a few millimeters at most, of mana. The membrane of mana flowed as smoothly as a stream of water, reflecting light in a lovely fashion.

"It doesn't have to be at this level, but I'm going to have you two make your enchantments more workable. If not, you'll only waste your weapons."

"Urgh..." Tesfia's ears burned, a cold sweat trickle going down her cheek.

Since the two girls were practically breathing on the stick, Alus undid his enchantment to grab hold of their attention again.

As mana flowed out from the body, it began at the handle and gradually moved up along the weapon. However, that mana didn't return to the body. Mana directed out of the body was constantly degrading. That's why one always had to continually flow the mana out from one's body.

"Just so you know, this is training for beginners. If you can't do this, you won't be able to defeat Fiends. If anything, you'll be preyed upon almost immediately."

The two swallowed their breaths with a gulp.

But there was only a single stick in front of them. Having noticed this, Alice opened her mouth to say something. However—

"Then let's begin." Alus chopped the stick in two with his hand.

"—!!"

They had no idea what move he'd just used. The girls had heard that something like this could be done with training, but both were vaguely aware this wasn't just some piece of wood. And it obviously wasn't made out of something easy to cut like glass.

Normally, mana was the energy used to cast spells. And it wasn't strange for spells to exist that could cut or sever objects.

However, Alus hadn't used any incantation, nor was he wielding an AWR that allowed him to omit the incantation. He would explain the mystery, but first he wanted to see if they got it. "... This is an application of enchantment."

"No way!! I didn't see any mana." Despite Tesfia seeing it happen before her eyes, she questioned Alus, and Alice nodded her head as well.

Alus was fed up. "If the likes of you could notice it, I would hardly be able to call myself a Single Digit."

The two of them didn't understand what he was talking about, and looked at him questioningly. Seeing how curious they were, Alus knew that unless he revealed the trick, Tesfia and Alice would be too distracted by the mystery to go on to anything else.

Alus shrugged with a resigned expression. He rolled up a memo pad, making it look like a stick. He then repeated the same technique as before, but this time in slow motion.

He slowly swept his hand sideways.

The two girls, heedless of any danger, brought their faces extra-close so they could solve the mystery.

Well, Alus wasn't going to make any mistakes that would put them in jeopardy, so he continued on with his demonstration. The moment his hand touched the paper, he covered it in mana in an instant. It was such a miniscule amount of mana that the two girls wouldn't have been able to see it, if they didn't observe it from up close.

Again—mana deteriorates once directed outwards from the body. If the two inexperienced girls had tried it, they wouldn't be able to enchant an object in an instant, and their mana would therefore move slowly towards the object's tip, building up the membrane as they went along...

In the next moment, Alus' hand cut the paper without any resistance.

That was as far as Tesfia and Alice could discern. "So it was true! But..."

"Yeah. Why does it cut the paper?"

Normally, imbuing something with mana was meant to strengthen the object; and since organic material had the property of absorbing mana, there would usually be no point in trying to enchant it. Even if a fist were covered in mana, the majority of it would be absorbed while the remnants of it would deteriorate and disperse.

That's why Alus being able to cut through paper with his hand meant he wasn't just enchanting it. It clearly went beyond common sense, but even if he explained that now, the two girls would only get confused.

Keeping a twitch from showing on his face, Alus wondered if he should ask Sisty if these two were really as excellent as she said; but since that wouldn't change the situation for the better, it was a waste of time.

So he decided to make it easier for them to understand. "You, give me your AWR," Alus said, pointing at Tesfia.

Perhaps not liking being called 'you,' Tesfia frowned. "I have a proper name, you know." She held her katana against her chest, as if saying she'd never let him have it.

Feeling these backs and forths were another waste of time, Alus was arrogant with her. "What was it again?"

"—!! This guy really is..."

"Stop it, Fia." Alice calmed Tesfia, who had let her anger get the better of her. Tesfia was rolling up her sleeve and drawing her katana.

"Oh, that's right, you were Trashfia. Thanks, Alice."

"That's wrong!"

Alus grinned maliciously, but knew they wouldn't get anywhere like this, so he returned to a serious expression. "Tesfia, if you don't lend it to me, we'll only waste time."

Tesfia was dumbfounded by how fast Alus changed attitudes, but lost to his persistence. While she was still angry, she let out a sigh of relief that he hadn't actually forgotten her name. But Alice was likely the only one who understood her feelings.

Alus unsheathed the katana and said admiringly, "This is definitely a good sword. The magic formulas are accurate, too. I can understand why you chose this as your AWR." This was unreserved praise from Alus. Of course, it was directed towards the katana and not its owner.

The magic formulas engraved in the blade were, as he expected, meant to assist with ice attribute spells. He got to work covering Tesfia's katana with mana.

The two girls were spellbound, captivated by the beauty of it, bringing their faces closer to the blade despite the danger.

"Come on..." Alus brought them back to reality, then continued, "In this condition, it will of course cut the paper. Why do you think that is?"

"Ah—!!" It seemed they'd finally realized.

"That's right. The reason the blade can cut despite mana covering it, is because it's accurately tracing the edge."

The two shifted their eyes back to the blade, bringing their faces even closer than before. "I see it!" They'd finally caught a glimpse of just how precise and delicate Alus' mana control was.

"Of course, this on its own isn't all that impressive. With the real thing in front of you, all you have to do is cover it in mana." He spoke as if it were simple, but since the two couldn't even do that, it reaffirmed how amazing Alus was. "And a practical application of this is that chop from before. In other words, you don't trace the surface with mana, but intentionally control the mana to create a blade."

"To think something like that is..." Alice murmured, hardly believing her eyes, but with someone who could actually do it standing in front of her, she didn't finish her sentence.

But there was a contradiction here. And since the two girls hadn't noticed it, Alus left it unsaid.

Since mana had the property of deteriorating once directed out of the body, even if they could form it into a blade, it would only remain in that shape for a short period of time.

Alus' extraordinary disposition was what made it possible. He'd reveal the trick eventually, but it remained to be seen if the two could pull it off. "Well, if you can do this, you can reach all the way to a Double Digit."

Tesfia and Alice couldn't honestly rejoice at hearing this. Since they couldn't even properly do a normal enchantment, reaching that level would take an unfathomable amount of effort. Moreover, there was no guarantee they'd be able to master it.

"That's where this comes in." Alus handed each of them a piece of the stick he'd broken earlier.

The girls looked them all over as if to appraise them, and after determining there was nothing wrong with them, firmly grasped the pieces.

"Those were made using the corpse of a Fiend I once exterminated, so..." As he said this, the sounds of the pieces being dropped on the floor rang out. "Hey! There's only two of those in the entire world."

"No, but..."

If they were going to slay Fiends like this, their future looked bleak. "Don't worry," Alus said to them. "I've trained with that for years, so nothing's going to happen."

Alice, upon hearing that, picked her stick up. Tesfia, on the other hand, struggled, and was treating the stick like it was filth or hazardous material, holding it with the tips of her fingers.

"I don't have to go on here, you know."

Tesfia hurriedly fixed her grip on the stick.

While Alus knew he couldn't avoid being their instructor, he got that they couldn't go on unless he threatened Tesfia a little. "First, try passing mana through it."

"Yes!" Alice seemed to have switched gears, as she gave Alus a motivated answer.

However, the moment the two passed mana through the sticks, it dispersed.

"—!!"

Alus' lips raised in a grin, as he explained, "This is a part of that Fiend's nature. Any mana that touches it is dispersed."

"So how are we supposed to enchant it?" To Tesfia, this was an obvious question.

Alus would have preferred that she think of the right answer herself, but since that might take days he told her outright. "You need to hold the mana down."

The two probably didn't understand, since they'd never consciously moved their mana before. The fact that they didn't act right away was proof enough.

"I'm impressed you can call yourself excellent, as you are."

"We're not the ones saying it."

You might not say it out loud, but your attitude says otherwise, Alus thought. Even if Tesfia acted modest, she was very self-conscious. He restrained himself from telling Tesfia that people like her should just hurry up and get eaten alive by Fiends... but he couldn't stop himself from holding his head in pain.

Once again, he affirmed that only those who were good at looking after others were suited to be teachers.

Having been forced to realize that, one would think Alus' attitude toward the teachers might change... but well, it probably wouldn't. "Both of you, show me some skin."

There was a pause after what Alus said, which could be interpreted as sexual harassment, but then Alice obeyed him and showed him her arm, and Tesfia rolled up her sleeve. Anywhere would've been fine as long as it was bare skin, so if they'd really started to strip Alus would have had to admit he'd used an inappropriate phrase.

"Ouch!!"

"Ow!!"

Alus suddenly pinched Tesfia and Alice. Of course, there was a purpose behind it.

"What are you doing!"

An obvious question, but it would be faster to let them try it out. "Focus mana on your legs like this."

"..."

Mana was generated in the body and circulated through the body based on need. When using AWRs, Magicmasters had a tendency to unconsciously focus mana in the hand grasping the weapon.

It was possible to consciously focus mana into a body part. But as most people used that unconscious mana focus, the overwhelming majority habitually controlled their mana unconsciously.

As instincts were deeply intertwined with mana, one's reflexive behavior also had an effect on it. With mind and body so closely related to mana, it would sometimes run amok.

That's why Magicmasters always needed to remain calm... but this was unrelated to that.

In other words, by pinching them on the arm, their sense of pain kicked in, and their focus was directed to a single point. Mana also responded to the pain and flowed there. This was training to focus mana elsewhere from where it hurt.

However, the military version of this training didn't employ an act as kind as pinching. That involved whipping so hard that it left welts behind, so this version was much gentler to the girls. But if the pain wasn't sufficient, it wouldn't be training. Since they would give direction to the mana that had unconsciously gathered in the pinched area, they'd need some level of tolerance.

As he put a bit more force into it, their faces twisted in pain. Their skin would be a little red later, but this shouldn't hurt so much that they wouldn't be able to think.

"What the hell is that?"

Tesfia's unconscious gathering of mana in her arm and her conscious gathering of mana in her legs clashed, resulting in her mana gathering somewhere completely different. As for Alice, mana was rapidly gathering where she was being pinched for some reason.

Alus coldly continued, "That's no good at all. Are you two seriously four-digits?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm asking if you can call yourselves four-digit rankers without even being able to do something like this." Alus suddenly worried for the future of the Magicmasters, and for all of humanity.

Then again—those weren't his true feelings. In the end, he didn't have much interest in humanity's survival. He wasn't going to be bothered no matter what happened in the future. Even if all other humans were to die, he was confident he could survive.

But if that happened, he would end up studying magic just for his own sake, which would be a dull and uninteresting life.

In short, he wasn't all that serious about preserving humanity's future, but he wasn't apathetic enough to completely abandon humanity.

"F-Fine. I'll master this in the blink of an eye," Tesfia said enthusiastically, but she was already getting distracted.

Alice nodded firmly as well, silently burning with fighting spirit, but the results were the opposite of her resolve.

"Well, no matter. I'm returning to my own research," Alus said, letting go of their arms. "Since there's two of you, if you keep pinching each other you'll manage eventually. Call me when you master it."

"...!!"

The two took a short break and rubbed their red skin. They were a little puzzled by their training being very different from what they'd imagined, but now that they understood the meaning behind it, they accepted it.

However, they still felt a little sad at Alus abandoning them like they were poor students. They had the will to go on, but didn't think they'd get through to the end.

Perhaps motivated by that desolate feeling, Tesfia called out to Alus as he walked back toward his desk. "Um, don't you have some kind of hint..."

Alus stopped dead in his tracks and turned around. He glanced at Tesfia and put on a small smile. "Don't hold back," he said, making a pinch and a twist with his fingers.

It was vague and roundabout, and couldn't be called a hint, but before Tesfia and Alice could object, their faces froze as they remembered the pain.



The girls' training continued late into the night. The official training hours were just between after school and dinner. The two intended to head home to the women's dorm on the Institute grounds, with there being no real dangers on their way.

The Second Magical Institute, being as prestigious as it was, had a robust security system, meaning the campus grounds were safer than it was outside.

While there was no practical difference in the disposition of mana between genders, letting girls walk home without an escort was still considered unacceptable in the general public's eyes.

That wasn't particularly the reason why, but Alus accompanied the girls back to their dorm. "Hey, pay more attention to where you're walking."

"..."

Even on their way home, Tesfia and Alice were still pinching each other's arms. From time to time they closed their eyes to refocus, so from an onlooker's perspective they looked quite unsteady.

That said, Alus wasn't kind enough to gently let them know about objects in their way after his warning was ignored.

The street light shook with a big *smack*.

"—!! Urgh."

"Fia?! Are you okay?"

While walking with her eyes closed, Tesfia had sure enough crashed into a street light. She crouched down, holding her forehead and giving Alus a tearful glare. "Hey."

"What."

"It wouldn't have hurt to tell me about that."

But that excuse would only fly for civilians, not Magicmasters. "Come now, if you're dealing with Fiends they're clearly going to attack. And if you're too busy focusing on enchanting and let your awareness drop, you're only going to get killed. All while being a laughing stock."

While Tesfia couldn't bring herself to complain about Alus not even trying to hide his fed-up expression, her glare turned even more resentful in response.

As a result, the two—especially Tesfia—stubbornly continued their training all the way home.

"So this is the place..." The moment Alus saw the women's dorm he was dumbfounded and speechless.

While he had his own room in his laboratory, he'd seen the men's dorm once and there was a clear difference in the security systems. This had been designed so that entry was impossible without passing through an authentication gate that also served as the reception area.

The tall walls like you'd see at prisons were likely not there to keep the residents in, but rather to keep invaders out.

Tesfia and Alice authenticated themselves with familiar motions, and the double-layered doors slid open.

Alice said, "Al, thank you very much for today. I'll see you tomorrow in class."

"Well, good work! Keep it up tomorrow too... Al," Tesfia said.

The nickname still felt somewhat uncomfortable to Alus as Alice politely said her thanks. In contrast, Tesfia carelessly gave him a short wave, but her awkward intonation sounded strange, and she raised the pitch of her voice at the end as if asking a question. The way she waved her hand was like shooing away a critter, and she averted her red face like she was embarrassed.

Alus shrugged in exasperation. "Make sure you know how to do it before you come next time."

As Alus said this, Tesfia, who had turned to look his way while walking forward, crashed into a soft wall. Her face was buried in that wall, or rather that ample bosom. "Oof."

"Ms. Socalent!" Alice said, upon seeing this Ms. Socalent, who happened to be the dormitory supervisor that Tesfia bumped into.

Tesfia, on the other hand, was buried deep in that magnificent wall, unable to form any proper words. "Um... I don't believe we've violated curfew."

Based on Alice's polite speech, this girl was most likely an upperclassman. She had long black hair that reached to her waist, and her graceful facial features formed into a smile.

Alice seemed concerned over breaking the curfew, but the girl's expression was full of affection, the complete opposite of anger.

However, Alus' instincts told him she didn't have as gentle a disposition as her expression said.

She was a good-looking girl. It would be more apt to call her beautiful than cute. Her beauty was the mysterious sort that would charm the opposite gender. Height wise, she was about as tall as Alus. Alice was more adult compared to Tesfia, but this Socalent girl was more voluptuous, closer to Witch Sisty. That was all the more reason for Alus to find her smile alluring.

"Welcome back, Fia, Ms. Alice." Her voice was tender, her lips lustrous and appealing.

And Tesfia—who'd finally escaped from the ample bosom—quickly righted herself and bowed as Alice had. But she had a suspicious glint in her eyes. She couldn't understand why the dorm supervisor would come greet them herself.

Alus felt like retorting when he saw Tesfia's polite behavior towards the upperclassman, seeing as how she never treated *him* like that, but he held back.

"Who might this be?" Ms. Socalent softly urged, with an unnatural smile.

Alus introduced himself. "I'm first-year Alus Reigin. We were late after staying behind to study." It was a formal, shallow line. Alus had a suspicious feeling about this upperclassman too, though for a different reason. That's why he stayed cool and kept his guard up.

"...!! Oh, no, I don't mind. The students here are dedicated after all. It's like there's no curfew, really."

She glanced at Tesfia and Alice as she said this, but soon locked onto Alus. "My name is Felinella Socalent. I'm a second-year student and the dormitory supervisor." She put her hand over her chest, returning Alus' introduction with a graceful bow.

Everything she did revealed how well brought-up she was. There wasn't a single flaw in her behavior. Her hair captivantly dangled in front of her face, and any man would be smitten by seeing her shift it behind her ear.

But Alus only felt caution when witnessing her overly-perfect gestures. He'd also heard the Socalent family name before. "Still, to think you're the dormitory supervisor in your second year." That position came with some heavy responsibilities. Alus would expect the supervisor to be a top class third-year student, or teacher.

Whether Tesfia understood Alus' view or not, she added an explanation. "Feli is the only second-year Triple Digit Magicmaster in the Institute. The two of us are acquainted through our families," she proudly added, pushing out her meager—compared to Felinella's—chest.

If they were acquainted on a family level, that meant Felinella was nobility, too. She may have been granted peerage, but the aristocracy itself wasn't suitable for this day and age. But as the established and distinguished families had deep ties with the military, the aristocracy was still alive today.

As Magicmasters' status and authority were largely influenced by their ranking, the higher-ranked Magicmasters received more respect. That's why, if you wanted to protect your pride and dignity, you would naturally be focused on your rank.

As a result, many who represented noble families earned ranks befitting their status, meaning there were many nobles in the upper ranks.

"I see. That makes sense," Alus nodded.

Felinella cast her eyes down in humility. "I am merely rank No. 375, Mr. Alus."

"..."

That said, a Triple Digit being at the school as a student was strange in and of itself. Like Alus had told Tesfia and Alice, exterminated Fiends had the most impact on your rank. As Institute students wouldn't experience actual combat, they shouldn't have a lot of chances to climb up to triple digit range.

While dubious, Alus realized something Felinella said bothered him. He also noted she'd said 'merely' and his conviction grew stronger.

He was probably correct in his suspicion. And if it was just his misunderstanding he could apologize. "How is Lord Vizaist? He was a great deal of help to me back then."

Felinella gently smiled at Alus' words. Apparently he was dead on. "Yes, you took care of my father as well."

Lord Vizaist was a general in the military, and Alus had done missions under his command in the past. For a long period of time he achieved unparalleled results and his rank improved until he was transferred to be under the direct control of the Governor-General.

Officially, seven nations were protecting humanity, but in reality all of humanity was being protected by a single nation, of which Alpha was just one territory. As such, there was no General of the Army, so to speak. The Governor-General held the highest rank.

Of course, Tesfia and Alice were astonished by this exchange. But only for a brief moment. Tesfia suddenly remembered something, and whispered into Alice's ear.

Alice then spoke with an understanding expression. "Do you know Al, Ms. Socalent?"

"Of course I am aware of him," Felinella said, after a short pause. "This is the first time I've met him, but I heard a lot about him from my father." A noble like Felinella paying respects to Alus was most likely because she knew his rank. "But, are you instructing these two, Mr. Alus?"

"Yeah, the principal pushed it onto me." Since Felinella was that man's daughter, Alus no longer spoke to her like he saw her as an upperclassman.

Felinella didn't seem to mind. In fact, her face lit up with joy as she interpreted his more relaxed manner of speaking to mean they were getting closer. "Oh, how envious I am," she said, putting her hand on her cheek in a charming manner.

Tesfia and Alice felt there were quite a few thorns in her words.

However, Alus merely furrowed his brow. "They might come home late from now on, so do excuse it, will you, Ms. Socalent?"

When Felinella heard these words, her temples twitched. "Mr. Alus, please feel free to call me Feli." She said it with a gentle smile, but a compelling force in her voice made even Alus falter.

"O-Okay. Then call me Al. These two are already calling me that, after all."

A gleeful expression appeared for an instant on Felinella's face, upon hearing his reply. Perhaps worried about her appearance as an upperclassman, Felinella glanced at Tesfia and Alice. But only Alus noticed it.

"I am happy for your offer, but with my father's position, me being overly-familiar with you might cause all sorts of problems. I-It is our first time meeting too, it is *very* regrettable, but may I continue calling you Mr. Alus?"

"A-All right."

"Ms. Alice, do feel free to call me Ms. Feli, please. 'Ms. Socalent' makes us sound like strangers."

Tesfia was already calling her that, so there shouldn't be any need to be afraid, but Tesfia was nodding her head alongside Alice for some reason.

That was because while Felinella was smiling, there was nothing close to a smile in her eyes.

Alus compared their treatment to his. He wondered if that was simply out of respect for his rank, or if there was some other reason behind it. Either way, he'd delivered the two girls to their dorm, so there was no reason to stay. "Then I'll take my leave here."

As he turned around, a voice called out to stop him. "Mr. Alus, these two are still girls, so don't send them home too late, even if it's for training."

"Okay."

"And... could you include me as well, even if it's only once in a while?"

Alus, along with Tesfia and Alice, was surprised by this. "W-Well, there's not much difference between handling two and three... it would just be 'once in a while,' right?"

"Yes!" Felinella answered with a bright innocent smile, fitting for her age.

"To be honest, I'm not pretentious enough to think there's anything a Triple Digit approaching Double Digits can learn from my instruction, so don't get your hopes up, Feli."

"I understand. I will receive your guidance with tempered expectations." In contrast to her words, Felinella's tone of voice was joyful.

With that, Alus finally returned home.

On his way home, he couldn't help but regret it. With Vizaist involved, it didn't feel like he could've refused, but more of his precious time would end up getting sacrificed because of it.

* * *

It was after school the next day, with the last lecture of the week finally behind them.

Alus had spent the day as peacefully as always (though this was only the third day he'd actually attended classes), thanks to Tesfia and Alice hanging out with him during break periods. It also seemed that Alus' nickname had influenced things for the better.

The other students had been surprised to see Alus and Tesfia's stormy relationship reach such a lightning-fast reconciliation—if you could call it that—but eventually accepted it.

All of the gazes directed toward Alus had changed, and things were peaceful... or they should have been, but the two girls' beauty continued to attract the male students' attention as always.

That's why the students' gazes at Alus had changed from contempt toward someone so unmotivated to being full of envy. The two girls were also still in the middle of maturing physically, and so could be expected to become even more attractive.

The behind-the-scenes battle for Tesfia and Alice's hearts would only grow more intense, but Alus himself was unperturbed.

"... I thought I told you to come *after* you mastered that technique."

After quickly leaving the classroom and returning to his own room, Alus gave Tesfia and Alice a grumpy look. By the time he'd arrived, the two were already standing at his door.

"It's fine, isn't it? It's not like you'll lose anything," Tesfia argued. "You watching us makes it easier for us to advance, and gives us just the right amount of tension."

"Al, please..." Alice said. "We want to get better as quickly as we can."

"No, I do lose something. My time." To Alus, that was enough considering this was volunteer work for him. And with them in the room, it wasn't difficult to imagine they would be pestering him for tips and tricks as well.

That said, he hesitated to dismiss Alice's serious plea. Besides... Alus looked down and saw red marks on their skin from pinching too hard all over. He had no intention of going easy on them because they were girls, but this might be going overboard.

"All right. If someone sees all those red marks they're just going to blame me. I don't mind if you're here, just don't bother me."

The two eagerly nodded their heads.

Alus slid the door open—

"—!!"

"What is this?!" Tesfia exclaimed. The room had completely changed from yesterday.

"Hm? Is there something strange?"

"... I give up, why don't men think anything of things like this?"

When she heard her roommate say this, Alice gave Tesfia an exasperated look. While it wasn't this bad, Tesfia had a mountain of things in their room too... but Alice didn't go so far as to mention it.

Huge piles of documents and books lay all over the room, and the floor was covered in written materials. The massive desk was covered in the same, with not even enough room to put a drink down.

Just as Tesfia and Alice had been so engrossed with their training, Alus had similarly devoted himself to his research the moment the two had left, and had only stopped when it was time to head out to class.

The two girls looked at each other and rolled up their sleeves.

"I don't know what you're planning on doing, but don't do anything unnecessary. It isn't messy, it's the result of effectively sorting and categorizing the materials."

"I'm not having it!" Alice had already gotten started. Her cleaning skills put a housewife to shame. Despite not knowing what the material was about, she was good at guessing the order based on how the piles were positioned as she tidied things up.

As for Tesfia... well, that was the daughter of a noble family for you. The enthusiasm was there, but her execution was anything but praiseworthy. Well, at least she wasn't making it worse.

The room was spotlessly clean within a few minutes, causing Alus to remark in wonder: "You can do anything, can't you Alice?"

"Hey, I cleaned up too!"

"... Uh... Yeah, thanks."

Tesfia felt like Alus had just evaded giving her a more provoking answer and was about to say something more, but Alus was a step ahead of her and shut down the topic. "Fine. I guess I'll watch over you a little."

The two probably hadn't cleaned the room with the hopes of him repaying the favor, so they looked at each other with joy.

While Alus said he'd watch over them, the mana control they were doing now was very basic. But just because they were currently stumbling, that didn't mean they had no talent. This technique was indispensable in battle against the Fiends, but normally it was learned slowly over a longer span of time.

Alus' prediction had been that it would take a month before they could move on to the next step of training.

However, today the two were exhibiting an exceptional level that made Alus think he might have actually awakened some inner powers of a master instructor. They were completely different from yesterday. It was probably the result of their efforts, still, it had only been a day. He couldn't help but be surprised.

"Not there. Gather it at the tips of your fingers."

As the two girls pinched each other, Alus brought his own fingertips close to theirs, having his mana slightly touch their manas.

Of course, with the disposition of their manas being different there was a repulsion. But that repulsion helped to make it easier for them to recognize their own mana within them. The goal was for them to try to guide it with a clear sense of direction.

The next stage of trying to bring their mana under control wasn't going to be so easily achieved, but it was only a matter of time. They were already starting to accurately perceive their mana, and even if it wasn't all the mana circulating inside them, they had managed to direct a portion of it. Just what was that disastrous scene yesterday anyway?

The two slowly gathered mana in the tips of their fingers.

"Don't lose your focus."

In their case, the girls were still easily affected by unconscious restlessness and lost their focus, so controlling the mana gathered at their fingertips was difficult.

In fact...

"Hey! Shut up." As Tesfia said this, she lost control of the directionality of her mana, and it began flowing to the pinched area on her arm.

"—!" Alice reacted in similar fashion.

"Look what you did," Tesfia said accusingly to Alus, who let out an exasperated sigh.

Shortly thereafter...

"I can't anymore..." Alice, having lost focus, wiped non-existent sweat off her brow. As the actual amount of mana she'd lost was minimal, she wasn't exhausted due to running out of mana, but she'd gathered up quite a lot of mental frustration. It was a training that required a delicate touch.

Well, it might be a good time to break. "I guess we'll take a short break."

The two wearily nodded their heads in approval.

As this break was for Tesfia and Alice, Alus sat down at his desk to continue with his own research. Perhaps thanks to their tidying up his materials before, he was able to change gears easier than he thought, and he comfortably immersed himself in his work.

Some minutes later...

"Now that I think about it, what kind of research are you doing, Al?" Tesfia asked.

"We never asked him that, did we."

The next moment, Alus had two interested pairs of eyes gazing at him. However, the smile on his face seemed to look down on them a little. "I was wondering if teleportation magic could be used in combat."

The teleportation magic at the Institute, the Circle Ports, was a byproduct of Alus' space manipulation magic. But since the military wanted to keep the theory's details confidential from the public, Alus had only published a thesis on the matter. He hadn't been involved in the steps that put it to practical use.

Of course, he'd experimented with it on his own to prove and confirm his theory. But his only objective was to create new spells and theories for innovating techniques to raise the strength of Magicmasters.

Fundamentally, Alus' inventions and discoveries were very different from existing techniques or even the realm of logic. At the same time, they made way for unexpected byproducts.

"This is what he means by teleportation, right?" Tesfia touched her insignia, turning to Alice.

"... I think so." Alice had a questioning expression, as if seeking Alus' answer.

"That's right. The system utilizing those insignias was the first one to make use of transport type magic."

Apart from that, there were also Circle Ports spaced out at regular intervals along the most important line of defense for the nation in case of emergency. The military and the nation were always on the lookout for invading Fiends or other abnormalities.

So what Alus meant by first, was that it was the first use for the general public. "That said, there are still flaws. After all, the greatest distance it will work is between three to five kilometers."

It was, of course, a technology that still had a lot of room for improvement. Specifically, it copied the user's mana, and with that as its basis it transported it to the destination transport gate. As transportation was performed through working on space itself, it was commonly referred to as 'leaping.'

A fundamental problem, however, was that the copied mana information deteriorated. The reason was because it was impossible to contain pure undefined mana in space with the current level of technology.

Deterioration couldn't happen when reconstructing mana into magic, but mana alone tended to deteriorate with time after leaving the body. Experiments showed that teleportation over a certain distance was problematic because of this.

"I was originally thinking of putting it to use as attack magic, but the problem is what property I should stress on improving." There was no way these two would have an answer to his advanced question. But perhaps saying it out loud anyway was in the nature of being a researcher.

Tesfia asked, "You mean, how best to use it in combat?"

"Well, that's not a wrong interpretation." The problem was taking into account what kind of use the spell would have when making it. And as the spells Alus invented needed to be beneficial for all Magicmasters, that made his task even more difficult. "Even broadly speaking, should it be used to kill Fiends, effectively obstruct their actions, support allied attacks, or safely and swiftly retreating?"

"Hah..."

Unlike the inarticulate Tesfia, Alice raised her hand for permission to speak. "What about making it a spell to protect Magicmasters, or something that can cover a wide range of applications?"

Alus never rejected any opinions without first listening to them. Perhaps because of his researcher nature, he had a habit of closely examining any idea, even eccentric ones, before coming to a conclusion.

But he'd already reached a conclusion for Alice's suggestion a long time ago. "That would be pointless. Teleportation magic might be used for offense, defense, or support, depending on use, but trying to make it work for everything will make it useless."

Spells listed in the spells encyclopedia were determined after their proper names were acknowledged. A proper name being established meant that use of the spell was recognized.

As such—a spell that could be used for any purpose was nonsense. On the battlefield, a spell with a single fixed use was far more helpful than a half-assed ad hoc spell.

"Well, it might just be better to check with the Magicmasters on the frontlines," Alus said.

Tesfia considered that Alus himself had fought on the frontlines for most of his life, so he could probably come up with a proper use himself, but...

that's when she remembered the principal saying he was an exception, so she stopped herself from saying it out loud.

If the ranked No. 1 Magicmaster created new spells using his own skills and talents as the basis, he would likely be the only one that could use them, making it meaningless for others.

Especially so since Alus' goal was to increase the general strength of Magicmasters so that he could take it easy himself.

After that, it was time for Alus' one-sided and mercurial lecture on magical theories and their uses, along with the far shorter Q&A session.

Since the two girls were novice Magicmasters, Alus of course didn't reach any meaningful conclusions. But he'd never had the chance to share his thoughts with others before, so he continued to talk on, forgetting the time.

The two girls managed to get back to their dorm before breaking curfew, but their precious time had mostly been used up by Alus' lecture. So he couldn't help but accept the blame, when Tesfia accused him that they hadn't been able to train properly.

... As such, Alus was unable to find an excuse not to instruct them the following day as well.

* * *

"But still, it was a surprise to see Al like that," Alice said, smiling as she walked alongside Tesfia. Her manner of speaking made it seem like she was talking about a friend of the same age, rather than the ranked No. 1 Magicmaster.

Unlike yesterday, they were walking home alone. While Alus had left the building with them, he was suddenly called to the principal's office, and they'd parted ways with him with heavy steps.

"He was like a child boasting," Tesfia said.

"You mean befitting his age?"

"No, I mean like a child showing off his brand-new toy."

When Alice heard this, she could really see Alus being like a child and she covered her mouth to giggle. "Yeah, maybe... well, it's a bit outrageous for a toy."

"True. Still, I understand his skills as a Magicmaster, but what about his talents as a researcher?"

Alice answered without a doubt in her mind. "I'm sure he's excellent."

"I wonder about that. He might just be researching boring stuff that has no hope for a future."

"Hmm, I don't think so... but how about we ask him to show us the spell he was talking about today when he completes it."

"Yeah, let's. But after he's spoken so strongly about it, you better not laugh when it turns out to be a lame spell, Alice," Tesfia said, like an older sister explaining to a younger sister.

"You too, Fia. You're nobility, so you can't disgrace yourself by laughing with your mouth open even if it's funny."

The two flashed reserved smiles at each other.

Before anyone knew it, Alus' great research had been turned into something that could only be lame, the degree of his talent was dragged down... but that may have only mattered to the two.

Later, when the two understood even a portion of his research, their expressions would totally change.

But that is a story for the future.

* * *

After parting with the two girls at the research building, Alus headed for the principal's office with heavy steps and a heavy heart.

He anticipated that it wouldn't be anything good from what he and Sisty had talked about before, and from her gestures. He'd gotten the impression that he shouldn't get involved with her if possible, but by now that had turned into a conviction.

It took a couple of minutes to walk from Alus' private quarters to the principal's office in the main building, so going there on foot and not by the Circle Port was understandable.

He had planned on minding his manners and knocking on the door, but frowned as he knocked, clearly unhappy. Quickly receiving permission to enter, Alus opened the door in a hurry. "I still haven't asked anything."

Seeing Alus' frown, Sisty answered, "I still haven't heard anything."

Alus feigned ignorance and straightened his back. Sisty did have a higher standing here, after all.

"Well, no matter. As I'm sure you're aware, there's a proficiency exam at the beginning of next month."

"I've heard of it." It was part of the year's curriculum, a test intended to update the freshmen's ranks set when they entered the Institute based on their current skills. As over one thousand applicants needed to be assessed during the entrance exam, efficiency had been prioritized over accuracy. As such, this test was intended to take a closer look at the first-year students' abilities.

Alus already knew what Sisty wanted at this point. "In other words, this is about my rank assessment."

"Yes. Since I'd rather avoid any pointless commotion, I've arranged it so that I will assess you."

Alus would've loved to complain that this was abusing her authority, but he wanted to avoid said pointless commotion too. And, well, this was probably his only way out.

He knew the proficiency exam was listed in the yearly schedule, but when he thought about it, the actual methods weren't described. "I understand. But that's not all, is it. What's your real reason?"

The principal wasn't particularly surprised. If anything, she sighed with relief as she was finally able to move on to the main topic. But seeing that, Alus felt his hunch had been dead on.

"I'm glad we can cut to the chase. This is what I want." On Sisty's desk was a pile of papers. She then flipped them over, in other words telling him to read them to make it easier to confirm what she wanted.

Alus passed his eyes over the papers, then looked to Sisty for confirmation.

She replied with a smile and a nod as if to say he had her permission.

"..." Alus then thoroughly read through everything. He sighed. "And what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing in particular... what do you think?"

The materials on the desk were suggestions, and one contained details on a newly put-together proposal for the Institute. That one happened to be from the army.

In other words, it was practically a national policy; and since the Second Magical Institute couldn't cut their ties to the military they would have to accept the proposal.

It wasn't as though anything would change from asking someone their opinion, but it certainly was the kind of thing where one might want a third party's opinion, especially Alus' opinion.

"Before I answer, there's something I want to ask."

"Go ahead." Sisty's glamorous smile held traces of hope for his opinion.

"Is this something that's being proposed because I requested retirement?"

"Probably." It was a vague answer, but Sisty didn't see this as a problem.

As for the contents of the proposal—the goal of it was to allow the students to gain actual experience by battling Fiends, on the pretext of being an extracurricular lesson.

"I personally think we're receiving this late. This is already part of the curriculum for the first, fourth, fifth and seventh institutes. However..."

"This will only increase the number of dead," Alus said flatly.

"It will, won't it," the principal said in a light tone, trying to reduce some of the seriousness of the topic.

This was live combat. Lives would be at stake.

While the majority of students would enter the military upon graduation, and they would eventually encounter combat, the problem was that the students still hadn't gone through that kind of training yet.

But the real problem wasn't physical; it was mental. For the students that could at least use magic, low-classed Fiends shouldn't pose that much of a problem.

However, what Alus mentioned was a real possible outcome. This was because they might give up on fighting due to the fear of their first real battle.

As a Magicmaster's powers were largely influenced by their mental state, cowering in fear would cause them to lose their ability to use magic. And if that fear of Fiends remained in the semi-permanent form of a trauma, they might even fail to become full-fledged Magicmasters.

There was technically a safety net in place; but it was still problematic. According to the military's proposal, an upperclassman would stick with the first-years in case of an emergency. Though there was a difference in skill, they were still students, and when it came to eliminating Fiends there wouldn't be much of a difference between them. In case of emergency, the concern was that the personnel for it would be useless.

"In other words, this is what the top brass wants," Alus said.

"Indeed. With the barrier growing weaker, they probably want the students to get used to live combat as soon as possible. And it's likely that influential investors want to get a grasp on the quality of the various institutes as Magicmaster training facilities. It's the kind of thing the big shots would consider."

Alus sighed. He pushed the topic forward, wanting an answer to his suspicions. "So, what do you want me to do?"

"I was mostly assigned to defense missions, so you're more knowledgeable on Fiends."

Alus had a thing or two he could say to that, but decided to listen to the whole story first and urged Sisty to continue.

"So, can't you do something, Alus?"

"Something? Like what?"

"You know, like working over the top brass... quickly. And if that would be hard, you could do something else. Like for example, you could—"

"Not possible." Alus shut down the principal before she could make a second suggestion. He didn't have the influence to appeal a decision made at the top level. Or rather, he'd been intentionally made to lose the influence, just like how they'd been so reluctant to accept his resignation request.

Despite that, they'd used him all they wanted to for missions. If this was Governor-General Berwick's solo initiative, he might have been able to put in a good word for the principal. Unfortunately, it had to be seen as the entire military's consensus.

As for the other proposal the principal had hinted at... "Just how many students do you think are going to take part in these extracurricular lessons? It's impossible to cover all of them." Even for someone as powerful as Alus, it wasn't possible to protect all of them unless they were physically in one group.

In response, Sisty puffed up her cheeks and pouted, something Alus never thought he'd see someone her age doing. "Come on... then do you have any other good ideas?"

It didn't look like she was going to let him go so easily. Unless he at least gave her a suggestion, he probably wasn't going to be allowed to go home.

He shrugged his shoulders and scratched his head. "Just how much can this proposal be changed?"

The principal interfering with the top brass' consensus might bring her animosity and even result in her forced resignation. In short, opposing the overwhelmingly powerful military's way of doing things came with great risk.

The situation could be described as terrible, but if Alus came up with a good idea, then he'd have to have Sisty do her best and push her way through.

"Well, as long as it didn't change the point of the extracurricular lesson..." Sisty answered him with a serious look.

That expression said that she was going to get her way no matter what, as long as it was something minor. Though she wasn't open about it, she wanted to look out for the safety of the students under her care.

The two looked at a map. "There's no doubt that this is the area, right?" Alus said.

"Yes." Considering how plainly she answered, Sisty didn't seem to know the details, so it probably wasn't decided yet. But she still felt it was too fast to bring students to the Outer World, even if it was to beef up their forces faster.

"It's an area where the lowest-classed Fiends appear, but B-class Fiends will appear there from time to time. So holding the lessons over here would be better, even if it's a bit further away." Alus pointed to a location on the map, then slid his finger to another spot.

"Of course, it wouldn't be safe even then," the principal said with a bitter expression. She understood the risks as well. While she was primarily assigned to defense missions, she had still been in the field. The unexpected and unforeseen were everyday occurrences in the Outer World. It wasn't an exaggeration to call the unexpected the norm.

Battle in the Outer World required constant flexible preparations and strategies if the worst came to happen. But they were still able to detect high-classed Fiends appearing several kilometers away from the defense lines. On top of that, though the magical equipment in place to detect Fiends generally wasn't reliable enough to detect anything from farther away, it could detect calamity-level Fiends quickly enough, though not perfectly.

"In this case, there's a possibility that B-class Fiends can slip through, so we should upgrade the students' supervisors. Instead of upperclassmen, we should request official Magicmasters... but well, that proposal wouldn't pass," Alus concluded.

"That would be difficult."

The military's precious Magicmasters needed to remain on standby so as to be mobilized at a moment's notice. And it was hard to imagine the military approving their dispatch for a mere extracurricular lesson.

"Then we'll have to make do with assigning the higher rankers as supervisors. But rather than just one each, maybe have two or more. There's also the possibility of using teachers. The Institute has been entrusted with the composition, right?"

"That's true... but it's still headache-inducing," Sisty replied. "By the way, it's pretty much been decided that the composition will consist of five students and one or more supervisors."

"Then I wish you good luck." With that, Alus turned to go. In his eyes, he'd fulfilled his obligations by giving some suggestions in regard to the supervisors.

The principal, on the other hand, let out a stupefied "Huh?!"

"Is there still something else?" Alus spun around with a look that made it clear how much of a pain this was to him.

But this Witch wasn't obedient enough to accommodate Alus. "... I forgot to bring out the tea." This was an obvious excuse to keep Alus here, and she quickly sprung into action.

Even Alus hesitated to ignore this and go home anyway. He tried with his facial expression to show he was even more annoyed by the whole thing as a form of spite... but it was the bare minimum to maintain his sanity.

After that, the two spent the evening exploring different solutions.

In the end, Alus lent his knowledge, thanks to Sisty preventing him from leaving early.

"It will be tough, but if we overcome this, we'll be able to train excellent Magicmasters. Humanity's future is looking bright!" Sisty said like a missionary, raising her fist in the air.

Alus couldn't help but feel she was forcibly being idealistic in her manner of speaking.

Sisty smiled innocently.

He was fed up with it, but she did have a point when it came to ensuring humanity's survival. Alus going along with such obvious flattery was because of Tesfia and Alice. Their suitability for being Magicmasters would likely be made clear with this extracurricular lesson. If they produced good results, that would be fine; and if they yielded to the Fiends a different conclusion would be made clear.

Thus the diligent and scrupulous debate between a Single Digit and a former Single Digit took place.

After that, Alus would be called to the principal's office after he watched over Tesfia and Alice's training. He no longer had the willpower to curse his fate.

While mourning the loss of his precious time, he somehow maintained his mental balance by telling himself that this worked in his favor. In other words, he consoled himself by telling himself this would help him in the future.

Either way, there was a limit to the amount of time they had until the day of the extracurricular lesson.

And no matter how much they taught the students, they were still just novice Magicmasters. With their overwhelming lack of combat experience, they were unreliable and vulnerable.

* * *

It was the day of the freshmen's proficiency exam.

Tesfia and Alice visited Alus' laboratory before heading to class. The reason for that was because he'd barely attended class the past few days.

While Alus was guaranteed credits as long as he upheld the minimum attendance, his reputation would drop. If he was absent from the exam itself, he would need to retake it, and if he missed that too there would be a risk of having to repeat the grade. So the two had come to get him, being worried about him.

"—!!"

When Alus opened the door, his horrible condition came into view. With those large bags under his eyes, it was clear he hadn't slept properly the past few days.

"I told you clearly to get some sleep, and in the end you didn't sleep at all, did you? If you can't fall asleep, would you like me to sleep with you?" Tesfia said this and looked away, but with a mischievous smile on her face.

Alus, on the other hand, didn't have enough willpower left to fight back. "It's my time, don't go butting in on how I spend it. It's not like I can't sleep, but if I can get a pleasant night's sleep should we sleep together? How about today, even."

"Eh?! U-Uhm..."

Getting her mischief returned in kind without any ulterior motive behind it took Tesfia by surprise, and she suddenly recoiled.

While Tesfia was unable to hide her flushed cheeks, Alice's exasperated words brought the atmosphere back to earth. "Did you forget, Al? The exam is today."

Alus was absent-minded and spacing out. Several moments later, he finally spoke. "Was it now?"

"Go wash your face!" Tesfia shouted, having spotted the time displayed on the digital screen inside. She grabbed hold of Alus, spun him around and pushed him into the room.

"Fine."

This was their first time going to class together, but Alus let out a big yawn.

The designated Institute bag was unnecessary. Since he didn't have any textbooks, walking around with an empty bag was pointless.

Glancing at Alus being like that, Tesfia said to Alice, "Are you prepared for the exam?"

"I wonder. I did review everything, just in case."

With their textbooks in hand, the two uneasily checked in with each other.

But Alus' following words made it clear their efforts had been in vain. "What are you reviewing? It's a practical exam, it's not something you prepare for like that."

"Eh?!"

"If you knew that, then why didn't you tell us!"

Alice had stopped, her mouth wide open, while Tesfia who recovered quicker gave Alus a roundhouse kick to the back.

She might have meant it to be a wake-up call, but some grudge feelings from having wasted her efforts were mixed in.

Alus may have been half-asleep, but it wasn't much trouble as he easily caught Tesfia's leg with one hand.

However, that wasn't the problem. While her skirt wasn't overly short, as a result of the roundhouse kick being unleashed from a higher position, Tesfia's skirt vividly fluttered in the wind. And her dazzling white thighs could be seen underneath the thin silk slip she was wearing.

Time seemed to freeze for an instant, but Alus had no interest in that secret garden.

But even so, the blush on Tesfia's face visibly grew brighter and brighter. "#%&\$@&#!!"

Before long, a mana-clad right fist came flying at Alus. It wasn't like its power was increased by that, but the fact that mana was instinctively flowing there meant it was a serious punch with all her force behind it.

Alus carelessly pushed the leg he'd so casually caught away, and used the recoil to smoothly block the punch. But if he messed up again, magic really might come flying at him next time. So he let go, and distanced himself.

"... Did you see it?" Tesfia glared at him with teary eyes. She pushed her left hand against her thighs and held her skirt hem down.

"Why would I look!" He hadn't seen it, nor had the kick been unleashed at such a height that Alus could see it from his taller stature. He felt she was being overly self-conscious, but if he said that he'd definitely have magic flying his way.

Since Alus lacked the tact to change the topic, Tesfia's face turned red and they ended up walking in awkward silence, all the while with Tesfia glaring at him as if trying to force him to purge his memories.

Alice tried to be considerate, bringing up different topics of discussion with Alus, but it all sounded awfully false.

Alus felt like he was forced to read a script, but as the main culprit, he begrudgingly kept on walking with them.

Because Tesfia held onto her skirt the whole way there, or so Alus believed, they just barely made it in time for school. But seeing her red face and far meeker behavior than normal (for her), he concluded he was being a little unfair.



Due to the exam, today's lectures were canceled. The only event taking place would be the exam.

The morning would be spent testing the expelling of mana at the training grounds, which consisted of using all learned spells.

Several teachers served as supervisors and accurately recorded the data. In order not to leak information on the spells that needed to be hidden, the already divided training grounds were covered in a dark veil that helped to conceal the substance of the exam.

As classes took the exam one at a time, it was inevitable that it took all morning.

Alus and the others quickly changed into training uniforms. After that, they waited in turn.

But Tesfia, being who she was, couldn't sit still while waiting for her name to be called. She seemed to be trying to distract herself by reviewing her mana control, but an extraordinary amount of nervousness could be seen in her face.

That's when Alus remembered that she was nobility. In other words, she needed a rank that wouldn't bring shame to her name. While she already had a four-digit rank, she couldn't help but feel nervous since the examiner when she had entered had told her that the ranking might not be accurate.

It was just an exam, and it was hard to imagine that her ranking would change that much from this outcome, but telling Tesfia that now wouldn't mean much. Which was why Alus kept his mouth shut.

Meanwhile, Alice was pouring mana into a borrowed AWR, making sure that nothing was wrong. Similar scenes were happening all over the training grounds.

Alus was the first among the three to have his name called. Tesfia and Alice were nearby as if it was their official place.

He headed for the ninth training ground feeling bored.

The remaining two didn't wish Alus good luck. They knew he didn't need it. Instead they focused on themselves, putting more strength into their grips on their AWRs out of anxiety or enthusiasm.

By the way—Alus was the only one without an AWR.

Because of that, unlike the start of the term when nobody paid attention to him, they all stared at him now like he was some kind of intruder. While they didn't whisper behind his back, their rude glares said everything.

As Alus didn't even have his book today—maybe he just forgot it—the looks he was getting were even more puzzled.

In this atmosphere, Alus stepped into a suspicious-looking partition on the training ground that was stained black.

Inside was, as previously arranged, Principal Sisty. "Oh, you didn't bring an AWR?"

“... Are we really doing this?” Alus’ lack of motivation was only natural, as he didn’t care about his ranking. And being the current No. 1, he had a hard time finding any meaning in measuring his mana.

“Isn’t that obvious?” Sisty said, folding her arms.

“I’ll be fine even without an AWR.”

“Right, then first...” The principal pointed to a box next to her. It was just big enough to fit a person. This was the device that the military used to measure mana capacity. Aside from the front, the inside was covered in metal plates for detecting mana.

“Stand over there, then please emit some mana.”

Alus had already begun doing that. The system worked by having the metal plates detect mana over a period of time, measuring the user’s mana capacity.

“All right, that’s enough.” Sisty looked at the display on top of a table. On it was the test measuring, followed by a percentage showing the state of progress. “—!! Huh?!”

This was a response Alus was used to. So in order to avoid the pain of having to do it again, he let Sisty know in advance, “It’s not broken. So can we move on to the next step?”

“Y-Yes...” Her answer was somewhat unclear. Well, if the tester wasn’t a former Single Digit like the principal, they would likely have been even more surprised. But even then, it was a number that was hard for her to believe.

Just in case, Alus made up a story that might convince her. “I was always on the frontlines.”

“R-Right.”

But no matter how much he’d been at the frontlines, Alus hadn’t encountered so many scenes of carnage that they’d help him grow this much. This mana capacity was innate... which was why he’d been able to shine in the military.

“Uhm, next... I’d like you to use magic you’ve learned...” Sisty still seemed to be shaken up, unskillfully putting measuring equipment on Alus’ limbs.

“I’ve passed on that kind of measuring in the military, too.”

“Why?” The principal stared at him with a puzzled look. She was now less shaken up, and more simply curious.

“When I use magic, the output exceeds the meter.”

“Hmm... Well, it should be fine.”

“I’m sure that thing’s going to break.” Alus indicated the expensive device to make his point.

But Sisty’s eyes sparkled with curiosity, which overpowered her worry about the risk.

Alus sighed, thinking to himself that the principal really was a Magicmaster through and through. “I can’t imagine you having countless spares of that machine, so let’s keep it to just this one.”

“Right,” Sisty nodded, and moved over to the screen that displayed measurement data. “If you’re using an attack spell, shoot it over there, please.”

In front of Alus was a cone with the wide bottom pointing his way. The inside was hollow for the purpose of taking in magic.

This too was something Alus was used to seeing. By unleashing magic inside the cone, the walls with their high affinity for measuring the output, composition, total mana amount, attribute and more in great detail, would at the same time absorb mana to weaken the impact.

Even if the power exceeded the rate of absorption, it was designed so that the spell’s power would head into the cone, gradually absorbing more mana.

There shouldn’t have been any cases of breakdowns due to exceeding the maximum measurable values—but Alus broke this machine as if it was nothing.

* * *

Shortly after Alus’ exam began, Alice’s name was called.

“Good luck, Alice.”

“You too, Fia.”

As Alice began to walk to the second training ground, Tesfia began to focus in preparation for her own turn.

Alice suddenly stopped, feeling the ground trembling a little.

At first, it had only been a slight tremble, which she wondered if she really felt or not; but that turned into conviction as the movement became more powerful. It was a disaster event.

There had been a big shift in the tectonic plate of this continent when the Fiends appeared, so this wasn’t unprecedented. So the students’ disaster readiness when it came to these kinds of things was flawless.

The moment Alice poured more strength into her legs and body to counteract the trembling... “What—!!”

An explosion echoed through the training grounds, stirring up a commotion. Everyone forgot about taking refuge as they stared in the same direction.

The ninth training ground now had black smoke coming out of it.

Teachers ran around wondering what had happened, but the woman stepping out of the ninth training ground was the first to speak. “There’s no need to worry. Please continue with the exam,” said Principal Sisty, emerging from the training ground covered in mana.

Dubious glances were cast, as people wondered why the principal was one of the examiners, but only for a moment.

Sisty chanted something, and lightly spun a raised index finger around. As she did, the black smoke began to gather into a single spot in a whirl above her head.

It was a stunning feat. In the end, it wasn't until Sisty had sent the black smoke outside that the dumbfounded teachers remembered they were in a middle of an exam.

In the next moment, Alice, having returned to her senses, asked Tesfia, "What just happened?"

"Who knows, but isn't that..."

Having recalled which student had been taking his exam there, Alice rushed to the ninth training ground and called out with a shrill voice, "Are you okay, Al?!"

Alus was alone, looking over the smashed-to-pieces equipment. "Oh, Alice. What a waste..."

Tesfia appeared, with a stern face. "What did you do?"

"To think you'd be this strong... You really are unbelievable." Behind Tesfia was the principal, speaking in a stiff voice. Of course, the reason there wasn't the slightest bit of soot on her outfit was because she too was one of the best Magicmasters.

"Anyway, we're still in the middle of an exam, you two."

Tesfia and Alice darted their eyes around when Sisty said that, like what had happened wasn't a big deal.

After a light scolding from Principal Sisty, the two girls left the exam ground, leaving Alus and Sisty behind.

"But still, that spell... that was a space manipulation spell, wasn't it?"

Alus' eyes widened at Sisty's question. *That's a former Single Digit for you.* It was normally an unspoken rule that Magicmasters didn't pry into each other's arsenal of spells. "Correct," he answered her, with some respect and admiration.

"There was also a lot of heat generated. Would that be fusion type magic?"

That one was off. The heat and resulting explosion were caused by the measuring device being unable to take the overwhelming amount of mana. But Alus looked down, as if to say it was just as she surmised. It was more convenient that way.

He had indeed used space manipulation magic, like she guessed. But Alus didn't want anyone, not even the principal, to know anything more than that.

To begin with, spells that directly interfered with space didn't exist. Space manipulation magic was instead divided into different groups, and was a generic term for a series of organized magic types.

Of course, it had been theoretically proven that space could be manipulated. That's why Alus had purposely used fusion type magic at the same time.

The fusion phenomenon was the true nature of the spell he had used before. The reason it looked like space had been manipulated was a secondary effect. In other words, he had purposefully invited the

misunderstanding that the space distortion was a secondary effect, instead of its true nature.

So far, this was all within the realm of common sense within the field of magic. The only one in the army who knew that Alus' power exceeded the common sense realm was Governor-General Berwick Sarebian. An overwhelmingly powerful force was feared. And there would be many that sought to make use of it. However—

“But if a Magicmaster of your level were to use fusion magic on its own, it wouldn't be that weak. Perhaps there is a different property to it.”

“—”

It was a casual doubt, just something that popped into Sisty's head. She put her finger on her chin, thinking.

Fusion type magic was a highly advanced spell belonging to the fire attribute. So a simplistic categorization would label Alus' mana as belonging to the fire attribute, but this former Single Digit seemed convinced that this wasn't the true nature of Alus' mana.

Magic was divided into several different natures. People could always be categorized as having an affinity with one of those natures. In Tesfia's case it was ice, and Alice's was light.

Of course, that was just affinity, and it didn't mean they were restricted to just that type; but the affinity had a great influence on the magic used.

Alus' affinity was void.

Strictly speaking, void nature didn't exist, so it was more accurate to say that affinity wasn't applicable to him. Of course he could use magic of different natures at high levels. But when it came to his own mana's affinity, he believed that a new category, space manipulation, was necessary. But that couldn't be leaked either.

So Alus had to warn the principal from touching on that taboo. “Sisty!”

“Hmm? ...!!”

Alus' look and tone of voice were the same as always... but Sisty realized the atmosphere around him had completely changed.

“... That's true. I shouldn't pry into that.”

Alus then went on, changing the topic and atmosphere immediately, “So what do we do about the exam.”

“The measurements themselves aren't giving an error, but rather, that it's impossible to measure. So we'll probably end up setting an all-time high measurement.”

“I see.”

“That should be it for the morning exam. Is there anything you'd like to ask?”

“Not really.”

The principal, now showing her usual easygoing demeanor like nothing had happened, signaled the end of the exam with a “Good work.”

After seeing Alus out of the exam ground, Sisty let out a sigh. “Phew...”

That sigh was partly over her own carelessness, and partly relief over having safely settled the situation. She raised her head and let a relieved smile show.

As expected, what welcomed Alus on his way back from the troubled exam was the class staring at him like he was some strange beast.

Perhaps trying to escape the focused stares, Alus moved to Tesfia's side. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. Not having anything to do during this time made him restless.

Tesfia was sitting down, hugging her legs, with her katana leaning against the wall next to her.

Alice had already gone to her training ground, but it wasn't her turn yet.

The way Tesfia seemed lost in thought with nothing in hand made her look even smaller than usual. Suddenly, she muttered to Alus, "What was that before?"

"Looks like the equipment malfunctioned."

Tesfia stared at him suspiciously upon hearing this bald-faced lie. That said, considering the equipment did explode, it was the truth in a sense. Even if the reason for it was Alus' spell.

"You're kidding," she said harshly. She looked up at him with doubt in her face.

Alus found her stare irritating, so he gave her a soundly reasoned query: "Do you really want to look into it?" It went without saying that this was a courtesy between Magicmasters.

"... Hmph!" Knowing this, Tesfia returned her gaze to face forward.

"Maybe you'll get a chance to find out if we get into some actual combat," Alus muttered.

"...!"

He'd mostly muttered it to himself, but when Tesfia's name was called—

"Then I'll hurry and corner you."

Though he didn't see her face when she said it, her voice was determined.

Tesfia then got up, stretching as she did, and headed for the exam ground with firm steps and katana in hand.

Alice came back, and asked the same thing as Tesfia. But in her case innocent curiosity was the driving force, and the atmosphere was different than with Tesfia, so Alus almost let something slip...

* * *

With the morning exam over, lunch was held somewhat late.

The reason it was late was just because the exam had dragged on, not because of Alus' incident. Plenty of people now headed for the cafeteria, and plenty more headed to the kiosks. And those who brought lunch with them headed for the classroom.

Alus casually sat down at an empty seat, but then... "I forgot."

Not having gotten any real sleep, he'd been careless. That was partially because he'd never developed the habit of preparing lunch as well.

He fell face first into the table.

That was in part because he was tired, but mostly because everything was too troublesome. He could have just gone to the cafeteria or kiosks, but by now they were probably packed.

However... "Could you make room?"

He heard a voice by his ear, followed by the sound of a rustling bag. Even raising his head would be troublesome, so he just glanced up with his eyes. In front of him was a plastic bag, most likely recently purchased from a kiosk. He guessed food was inside.

"You didn't bring anything, right?" Alice was on the other side of the bag, and her soothing voice invited even more sleepiness in him.

Surprisingly, the food was for Alus. He had an overwhelming urge to sleep, but hesitated to ignore her. She had done this out of goodwill, after all.

When he raised his head, the two girls had already taken up positions sitting at the table with him.

"Here, take this."

"Are you giving it to me?"

If it had been Alice giving it to him, Alus would've said thank you right away; but he was surprised that it was coming from Tesfia.

"It's just something I bought from the kiosk, so it's nothing impressive."

"Appreciate it." It couldn't be helped that he kept suspecting something... but maybe it was just in his mind. "So it really isn't anything impressive."

Of course, that was just some banter. He was trying to provide a topic to make lunch more enjoyable, a conversational spice if you will, but...

"Then don't eat it."

"—Ah!"

The food was taken away from him before his eyes.

Well, it wasn't like he wanted to take it back, but Alus wasn't good with flattery or idle chat. He was capable of being eloquent, but he did feel a wall between himself and the sensibilities and atmosphere around students of his age.

After managing an earnest apology, Alus recovered his lunch and changed the topic to the next exam while chucking a sandwich into his mouth.

On a side note—with this being a prestigious institute, even the ingredients used at the kiosks were of high quality, and Alus found himself impressed by the sandwich tasting better than he'd expected.

"The next exam will probably be a mock battle."

"...!!"

Tesfia and Alice, who were having a similar lunch as Alus, stopped what they were doing. Judging from the looks in their eyes, they seemed to be suspecting some foul play.

"Where did you get that information from?" Tesfia demanded. "What's your source?"

Alus didn't particularly think it was cheating, but telling them that the principal was his source of information would only invite needless trouble. "It's just... if they want to accurately measure a Magicmaster's ranking, they'll have to do that."

It wasn't really a lie. The freshmen just never had their rankings accurately measured. In that regard, Alus had plenty of experience during his time in the military. As long as you got the gist of the exam, what you had to do wasn't all that different.

"In these kinds of mock battles, it's common to go up against someone higher ranked."

Being the current No. 1 meant that Alus didn't have anyone higher ranked than himself, so he normally didn't have his mana measured through mock battles. Or rather, top level Magicmasters that actively took part in combat didn't need to adhere to having their ranking and mana measured.

On the battlefield where life and death was the biggest concern, there was no point in measuring an always-changing rank. Measurements were required to be taken once a year, but almost no one actually wished for them.

But Alus smiled inwardly, cynically thinking that something had to be done considering the circumstances. "With this many, you two will probably face upperclassmen."

"No way..." Tesfia said.

"I wonder if we can win."

With Tesfia's and Alice's abilities, they might even face third years or teachers.

"Winning would be fine, but losing doesn't necessarily mean your rank will go down. If anything, by facing a tough opponent your strength can be more easily measured." Plus, points were added in the morning exam, with the mock battles in the afternoon being used to adjust them.

Considering their abilities, it wasn't hard to imagine that persons rather high-ranked in the Institute would be facing them. That was because, according to the manual for the measurements, the judge would increase their strength in steps.

First, they would stay on the defensive... and once they had a grasp on their ability they would move over to attack, and measure their combat abilities as well. Because of that, if the judge was weaker than the person to be measured, it would ruin the measurements.

"I'm going for the win no matter who I'm up against."

"..."

Tesfia was firing herself up, but Alus, who had already fought her once, kept quiet.

At the end of lunch, the class headed back to the training grounds.

This took even more time, as students from another class were still sitting around the grounds in a disorderly fashion. As in the morning, the training grounds had been split up into 10 divisions, with attack spells flying around accompanied by the sounds of combat.

That's when Tesfia and Alice caught the students' attention.

They really are popular, Alus thought to himself, as he leaned back against a wall on his lonesome.

"Fia, Alice, did you hear?"

"What?" The two tilted their heads at the sudden question from an acquaintance in a different class.

"Apparently Base was the opponent at the fourth training ground!"

Delca Base, a third-year Magicmaster student with a ranking in the 1000s, was a celebrity known among all the male students. Apparently, Delca already had a position secured in a unit that operated in the Outer World upon graduation.

Delca had a sincere and fair attitude for nobility, and an affable and helpful attitude that the lowerclassmen in particular admired.

"I see," Tesfia said.

"That's amazing!" Alice loudly declared, trying to make up for her friend's curtness.

These two had enough potential to have their names remembered by the Triple Digit Felinella. And they were also receiving guidance from a Single Digit, so something like this no longer surprised them.

This female acquaintance was surprisingly sharp, however. "... Aren't you two acting weird?"

"Really?" said Tesfia.

"Hmm...?"

Having a four-digit rank as a student was worthy of respect, but it was far from their goal. Which was why the two girls weren't especially keen on making a fuss over something on that level.

"You even went around asking students what their rank was before, Fia."

"Hey, don't say anything strange like that." Tesfia shook her hands in front of her, trying to deny it, but she then received a follow-up attack from the side.

"Now that you mention it, she did do something like that." Alice hadn't intended on teasing Tesfia that much, but the image in her head was so funny that she ended up giggling.

Before, they'd been so fixated on rankings, but now they didn't really mind so much. They were both aware of the reason. The two glanced at the black-haired young man leaning against the wall some distance away.

"Well, after seeing that..." Tesfia said.

"Yeah..." Alice said.

They smiled meaningfully. Alice's smile was gentle, while Tesfia's was a wry one.

Maybe the young man was sleeping, since his head was slumped over. They almost thought they could hear his snores from where they were.

"What's that supposed to mean? Tell me," their acquaintance insisted.

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Yes, indeed," Alice smiled.

Alice and Tesfia casually evaded her persistent questioning, and a harmonious discussion ensued, with a relaxed atmosphere to it.

Eventually, it was their class' turn.

As the classes on the training grounds changed, the students from the other class waved goodbye to Tesfia and Alice, and left.

As expected, Alus' name was the first one called. Having been gently woken up by Alice, he stretched his body. Getting some sleep had allowed him to shake off some of the lethargy, but he was still sleepy.

"I wonder who that guy's going to go up against," Tesfia muttered, as they watched him walk away.

"Maybe the principal?" Alice said.

"No way."

Sensing another disaster event on the way, the two put on forced smiles. But remembering that this afternoon's exam was a mock battle, they couldn't help but be curious.

Since they hadn't seen even a small portion of Alus' abilities in his battle against Tesfia, it was only natural they would want to see more of how the current No. 1 fought.

They snuck closer to the exam ground that Alus had entered, but were discovered by a teacher and scolded. Prying into these matters was worthy of contempt, and with them being in the middle of an exam it could even be considered cheating.

The two girls managed to avoid punishment, but wore disappointed expressions of regret.

As Alus stepped onto the exam ground he saw, as expected, the principal waiting. But unlike the morning, there was one more person aside from her.

A silver-haired girl.

She looked even smaller than Tesfia. Her hair was a lustrous silver color, and hung down from both sides of her face to end in a beautiful trim at her chin line. The silvery-clear eyes looking his way were slightly sky-bluish in color.

While she wore a training uniform, it wasn't a school-designated one. It was a black uniform that Alus was familiar with, similar to what was used in the military, and without a doubt a combat uniform.

On top of that, her expression showed neither joy nor anger, but seemed void of emotion. It was like a doll's expression. In fact, her graceful features would be best described as belonging to a doll.

Alus was the first to speak. "So she's the one who's been watching over me." He'd felt a set of eyes on him during his first mock battle with a classmate on the training grounds.

Perhaps realizing that Alus had found her out, the silver-haired girl's shoulders jumped.

"So you did notice," Sisty said.

"I'm guessing she was sent by the military."

The principal made a show of scratching her cheek, with an awkward smile.

The silver-haired girl took a step forward and got down on one knee. "It is a pleasure to see you here for the first time, Sir Alus. I am Loki Leevahl, dispatched to be your partner." She continued, with her eyes cast down, "Order 1034... Spotter 58."

Among Magicmasters were those who specialized in the detection of Fiends and the cores that made up their lives.

Unlike 'order' which was synonymous to rank, 'spotter' pertained to their rank as detectors. As detection was a valuable ability, only Magicmasters that were Double Digits or higher were assigned spotters as partners.

However, Alus had never required one due to his policy of acting alone, and the nature of the characteristics of his magic. "I don't need one..."

"Of course, I am aware." With her eyes still cast down, Loki responded in a clear, beautiful voice.

The principal continued where she'd left off. "Loki still doesn't have any experience as a partner. That's why you can give her guidance at the same time."

"I'm pretty sure this would be less of a partner and more of a supervisor." Alus felt that accepting any more trouble would eat too much of his time. For starters, he shouldn't even need somebody to supervise him. "I don't need it. Aren't you more than enough of a supervisor?" It was easy to tell that Sisty and her multiple requests were the cause of Alus' lost time.

"I-I'm busy, you see..." Sisty said, avoiding eye contact with Alus.

"Then I'll discuss it with the Governor-General. Spotters are valuable, and there shouldn't be enough margin to let one go to waste by partnering them with someone unnecessarily."

Alus tried to get rid of it with this, but the silver-haired girl's shoulders trembled once more at his aggressively stating she wasn't needed.

"Loki is excellent, you see..." That was the convenient phrase Sisty used as an excuse, as if to say that she would be a big help to Alus' grand plan.

But Alus wasn't going to make careless promises again. "How many are you going to push onto me?"

"Now, now, for starters let's have her be your mock battle opponent. You don't need to rush your judgment... all right?"

Alus felt like clicking his tongue, not having heard about this. If anything, it was almost like the point of the exam had changed, but for the sake of getting his credits he couldn't easily go against the principal.

Besides, Alus figured that seeing what this Loki girl was capable of wasn't going to change the outcome. "I understand. But I'm not going to fall for your words anymore."

While he'd warned Sisty, there was something that concerned him. And that was that the young girl was wearing a military uniform. He could feel traces of his past self in her. When he thought about it, he even felt like he'd met her somewhere before.

"Thank you very much," Loki said, and raised her head, revealing a somewhat tense expression.

That expression didn't seem to be due simply to sparring with the current No. 1, either. Alus saw a glimpse of desperation in her.

The mock battle began immediately.

First, Sisty waited for the two to prepare themselves as they moved back from the center.

Like Alus, Loki held nothing in her hand. But Alus didn't think this was because she was holding back. Hiding your weapon could give you a big advantage in battle.

In other words, she probably had combat experience.

As the fight began, Alus watched Loki focus mana into her arm. It was a decent mana control for someone approaching Triple Digits, but to Alus it still seemed sloppy and he couldn't really feel much of a difference between her and Tesfia and Alice. She was pretty much no threat.

"Sir Alus, if I land even a single hit on you, will you accept me as your partner?" Loki unexpectedly asked.

Hearing her question and seeing the way she was looking at him caught Alus' interest. Her expression seemed to be saying that he didn't need to hold back. Despite knowing her opponent was the current No. 1, she still wanted a fair fight.

That's why Alus realized she probably wasn't an idiot. One corner of his mouth raised in a fearless smirk. He wagged his index finger as if to provoke her. "*If* you can land one."

Loki deeply bowed.

In the next moment, the atmosphere around her completely changed. The air of a seasoned veteran clad her small body.

Alus felt the prickly tension of a serious fight. He faced it with a collected smile.

When Loki raised her head, there was no longer any hesitation in her eyes. She'd changed into combat mode.

Seeing that the stage was set, Sisty pushed the buzzer signaling the start of the battle.

Loki moved the instant the signal rang out. She headed straight for Alus while maintaining a low posture, putting her hands behind her back to pull something out.

Alus didn't see what it was until after she'd thrown it. It was a throwing knife with nothing that could properly be called a hand grip. It was the type that one used by holding it between the fingers. And its blade was thick.

Two from each hand—a total of four knives—were thrown at Alus.

While it was fast, he figured she was making light of him if she thought a frontal attack would work. Of course, he saw through the intention behind it as well.

Alus caught two knives between his fingers in each hand. They were, as expected, covered in mana. A faint light from a magic formula glowed from them, but no spell was unleashed.

After a single glance, Alus instantly overwrote it with his own mana. The light from the magic formula quickly stopped.

Loki was shocked by the sight. Then Alus returned the knives by throwing them back.

“—!!” She pulled out more knives from her waist to fight back.

It was a fine show of skills, as knives clashed against knives in midair... but Loki's new knives were unable to knock down the knives covered in Alus' mana.

The mana he'd used to forcibly overwrite the knife-type AWRs had their throwing speed increased, and the course they flew through the air was solid and stable.

As a result, they flew at Loki in the blink of an eye.

She moved to dodge them, but her graceful expression twisted with impatience made it clear that she'd just barely done so.

In the heat of things... while Loki's attention was grabbed by the knives for an instant, Alus had disappeared from her sight. And she was a little slow to realize this was a big mistake.

“It's over.”

That voice came from behind Loki.

An instant, a mere eye blink, was fatal against Alus. With a hand knife, he aimed for the back of her neck, looking to knock her out. “—!!”

However, the attack didn't strike Loki's neck.

Mid-strike, Alus changed direction, at the same time spreading his fingers open. He grabbed Loki's arm. “That's a spotter for you. You must have sensed mana.”

Loki was holding a knife in a reverse grip in her hand, attempting to stab behind her.

Alus thought it would be simple to use his spare hand to knock her out, but surprisingly enough she threw the knife with only the power of her fingers.

He moved his head to dodge the attack, and purposefully let go of her hand. As he did, Loki leaped to distance herself from him.

Alus praised her in his mind. She was excellent, just as the principal had said. She seemed to have enough skill to not only fight people, but also to serve as a Magicmaster.

The knives she used were AWRs intended for use against Fiends. They discharged electricity, which increased their speed and penetrating power. If Alus hadn't overwritten the magic formula in the split-second that he did during their first exchange, he never could have grabbed them. Low-class Fiends should be pierced by her first throw.

That's why Alus found it so strange. "Why aren't you on the frontlines? You should be good enough."

As he glanced to the side of the exam ground, Sisty, who'd been watching the entire time, seemed to know the reason. Instead of an answer, he received an exasperated expression in return.

By the way, being chosen as the partner of a Single Digit was a considerable honor.

When Alus had been in the military, spotters had come one after another to volunteer to be his partner. He had of course rejected them all, but because that had gone on for so long, he'd ended up getting called the Solitary Magicmaster.

Meanwhile, Loki wasn't giving him an answer either, and was instead gasping for breath. She had her own pride. And she was well aware that becoming the partner of the current No. 1 was no easy task.

As Alus expected, she wasn't foolish enough not to understand their difference in strength. But even then...

To her, she had to land that hit no matter what. She'd even gone as far as to ask the unreasonable of the Governor-General... This might be her one and only chance. And she didn't want to use the excuse that her specialty lay in detection.

That desperation showed on her face.

Alus hadn't guessed the foundation of her determination or powerful will, but he narrowed his eyes in response to her serious stare. The atmosphere around him changed in an instant, proof that he acknowledged her as an enemy to be defeated.

Faint mana in the shape of something like a departed soul started leaking out of his body. It was mana, but it lacked the appearance of it. The mana covering his body was squirming... as if it had a will of its own. It mysteriously quivered around him.

"Wha...!!" An astonished expression appeared on Sisty's face. She might have been questioning what it was, or have remarked from pure surprise. After an emotion similar to fear made its way through her body for a moment, she was unable to finish her sentence.

But at the same time—a mix between a scream and a sigh came from Loki. It wasn't an expression of anguish. She had just reaffirmed their difference in strength, but it didn't evoke disappointment in her own lack of power. If anything, she was happy.

Loki made a firm resolution. *Alus is strong*. With his inexplicable technique for handling mana, Loki couldn't prevent herself from gulping aloud, despite her distance from him.

It looked like this was the first time that even the principal had seen this. The way the mana, which had a different quality to it than anything she'd seen before, wriggled around in the air away from its owner made it look like a creepy shadow.

Though there was nothing to worry about with Alus, who knew what could happen to Loki if somebody else used this technique to create this demon of battle.

This is No. 1... If possible, she wanted to avoid using this. However, fright kept her feet stuck to the ground. But she was still able to move in that fear, thanks to her strong will.

Her knees were about to give way, and her legs refused to move. However, it was only a mock battle, and she was the one who'd taken it this far. She was unable to take it back now... so she stubbornly repressed the fear.

If she was going to lose this chance, she would rather...

Loki pulled out another knife and calmly lowered it into her trembling thigh. The blade didn't burrow its way too deeply into her skin, but the prickling pain pushed her leg, frozen stiff from fear, into moving.

Beads of sweat covered her forehead, and her silky thin hair stuck to her face. Loki slowly looked toward Alus, and taking a deep breath, finally stood up.

She used her trembling lips to quietly speak.

"With thunderous roar, may the vertex of tempestuous thunder manifest."

Ten knives drawn from her waist floated with their blades pointed downwards. An electric field was created, connected through the small holes in the grips. Eventually it formed a circle, and the ten knives began spinning around.

The knives spun faster as she continued her incantation, and the blades pointed at Alus.

As the knives moved fast enough to blur their shapes, the space in the center of the circle sparkled with lightning, and electricity surged up. With a trembling voice, Loki continued with the required verse despite this.

While it wasn't that powerful, Alus could feel an unwavering determination from her.

"No way! The vertex of thunder?! To think she could use one of the eight vertices at—" Before Sisty could finish her sentence, Loki concluded the incantation.

Her breath was ragged. Anyone could see she'd used her mana to the point of exhaustion. Finally, she mustered what strength she had left, drew back her right hand, and unleashed a frail yet powerful strike with her palm towards the center of the space.

"<<Naruikazuchi>>"

A bolt of lightning and a thunderous roar assaulted Alus. The thunderbolt closed the distance in an instant. The bolt moved far faster than human reflexes and even left sound behind.



This extreme speed was undodgeable. The explosion that morning was nothing compared to this. Clouds of dust burnt black were kicked up by the shockwave and danced in the air. The charring happened in an instant. And enough of it was kicked up to cover the entire training grounds.

Having used up the last of her strength, Loki collapsed. She lost consciousness, as if falling into a deep sleep.

The principal swiftly cleared away all of the dust.

And as the ability to see returned to the exam ground...

Alus was standing upright like a statue in the exact same place as he was before the explosion. He had his hand thrust out in front of him, and was staring at his arm.

"That was more than I expected." The sleeve of his training uniform was in tatters. Beneath it was his exposed skin, perfectly unharmed. A burnt stench hung about his clothes.

The power of the octagon's vertex of thunder, the highest ranking magic, should have exceeded the exam ground's ability to convert damage.

So Alus being uninjured was because his powers were overwhelmingly stronger.

Of course, not even Sisty should have been able to see how he'd managed to deflect that powerful magic through that cloud of dust.

But the reason for his suspicious glance right now was different. When you were at Alus' level, it was possible to get a general prediction of the power of a spell by watching the moment it was cast.

However, the power of Loki's spell far exceeded expectations. So he was somewhat unhappy to admit that it was a miracle that only his training uniform was scorched.

When he looked over at Loki, he realized why. "She didn't—"

Alus ran to her side and put his fingers against her thin white neck. "Call the medical team!"

"Huh? —I understand."

Alus had forgotten and used the military term, but Sisty quickly figured out what he meant.

Loki's pulse was growing very weak. It wouldn't be strange for it to stop at any moment. She was able to breathe in an even rhythm, but she was on the brink of death.

"What's going on?" Sisty asked, having quickly finished her call. She understood Loki was in a dire situation, but didn't know why.

"She's defaulting."

"—!!" The principal immediately understood what he meant. Defaulting was a form of mana exhaustion that far exceeded simple depletion. As compensation, Loki was losing her consciousness. Because she had used more mana than she had capacity, the deficit was being taken from her life force.

Alus shoved his hand inside Loki's clothing and searched for something with a serious expression. "Here it is."

"A catalyst!" Seeing what was in Alus' hand, Sisty froze up in surprise. In his palm was a hexagonal crystal.

Alus furrowed his brows, then crushed it in his hand. This was a Fiend's core. Of course, only high-classed Fiends' cores with their vast amounts of mana could work as a catalyst. This one was most likely harvested from an A-class or higher Fiend.

Normally, a spell manifested power equal to the mana provided. However, there was an exception. The exception was a catalyst. It worked by serving as a reactant, temporarily making up the difference in mana.

But it was a double-edged sword that claimed the necessary mana after the spell manifested.

It was a ritual implement that humanity used when the Fiends first appeared, in order to buy time to set up defensive lines. By now it was taboo, its use illegal in all nations.

In this case, the scale was different. Loki used knife AWRs, and even with their assistance, the spell required four verses. On top of that, there was the existence of the catalyst that caused Alus' expectations to be off.

Loki's temporary ability to use more mana than she had, was why there'd been such a discrepancy between Alus' prediction and reality.

Loki was in desperate straits.

A few minutes at best... Alus didn't have an obligation to save this reckless girl. Besides, what was the point of going so far as to lose her life, when her reward for victory was to become his partner?

He'd experienced it plenty in the Outer World. In his time in the military, before he began operating solo... it had happened on practically every mission. He no longer cared if he dirtied his hands.

He should at least kill her in a single hit, so she didn't suffer.

"—! Wait!" Sisty grabbed Alus' arm at the last second. The force her hand was gripping his arm with was so strong it was hard to believe it was a woman's hand. Her grip was supported by a firm will. It was very obvious to her what Alus was planning on doing. After all, a sharp needle-like blade of mana was extending from his hand.

"But she's already..."

This was a matter of ending Loki's life in the name of mercy. Alus didn't like this role very much either. As someone who'd thrown himself into the harsh battlefields, it was easy to temporarily suppress his emotions, but it left behind a bad aftertaste. If there was a way to save the girl in front of him, he would prioritize that first.

"What about healing magic?"

"It won't work. There's no physical trauma. This is a phenomenon brought about by magic and mana. With the training grounds system for

turning physical into mental damage not working, that much is for certain. It works on a completely different principle from healing physical wounds.”

“... If she doesn’t have enough mana, then we can supplement it.”

“That’s not possible either,” Alus said curtly.

A person’s information was firmly embedded into their mana, and it wasn’t possible to share it with others. It was similar to DNA or blood type, but mana had far more information in it. Knowledge, memories, experience. The majority of what made up a person was inside of it.

The principal already knew that. She’d just given voice to the first thing that popped into her head, and she seemed to have moved on to thinking of a different idea.

However, a light bulb lit up in Alus’ mind. He first dismissed it as naïve thinking, but something about it kept grabbing at him. The feeling that something was off was too big for him to think of it as just a trick of the imagination.

“Then...” Alus raised his hand in front of Sisty, to stop her from saying the next thing on her mind.

Yes, something about it was bothering him. He closed his eyes and thought deeply. That’s right, the idea of supplementing wasn’t bad itself. As Loki was still breathing, the compensation wasn’t being paid all at once... but clearly her life was slowly but surely being whittled down.

And then Alus reached it. “No...!! There is indeed one way.”

“Then...”

There was only a slight possibility of success, but there was a method. But using it could have a harmful influence.

He turned to Sisty. “However, you will be forced to remain silent about it.”

Forced. It was compulsory. And Sisty knew what he meant.

“Please make up your mind in two seconds.”

—All right.” Sisty quickly hit the button on the device in her hand, and locked all entrances and exits to the training grounds. She didn’t know what Alus wanted to keep secret, but the look in his eye made it clear it was something serious.

If she were to reveal it in public, Alus would likely punish her by force.

That’s how heavy of a decision it was, but as expected of a former Single Digit, even in this situation it didn’t take her two seconds.

With the conditions met, Alus quickly put his plan into action.

He didn’t know why he was going so far for this girl... but even then, there was no faltering in the way he moved his arm and mana.

Alus only knew of the harsh real world, where there was no mercy or forgiveness.

He found himself staring closely at her face to figure out the reason, all while focusing on controlling his mana.

The girl with the silver hair moved her mouth reflexively.

But no sound came out and her lips closed again. However, when they did, it looked like the girl was smiling a little.

* * *

As she slept, an old memory came to her.

It was the only thing she'd had to cling to in her life, and what she'd clung onto to get this far.

At the military's training facility there were young orphans, including Loki, whose parents had been devoured by the Fiends. She was left all alone. As her parents had been in the military, it was inevitable that the military ended up looking after her.

She felt anger towards a Fiend she'd never seen. The hatred of having her parents stolen away from her dominated her every decision. So when she was invited to become a Magicmaster trainee, she didn't hesitate to accept.

It wasn't until much later that she would come to regret it.

Loki enlisted at the age of eight.

Harsh training was her daily routine. Even her good memories were crushed by the hatred dominating her emotions. And those emotions wore down her mind.

So when even her hatred of Fiends was worn down, Loki thought to herself, *Why am I here?*

Her room was like a prison cell, with a simple bed. Her attire was the training uniform all young trainees wore. They were formerly white clothes... they were dirty now.

She'd never seen the place where her parents had been killed.

She didn't have anything left behind by them.

Even now, her parents' corpses were unburied, littering the Outer World where they'd perished.

Her hatred had long since disappeared.

All she had left was the desire to give her parents a burial, in gratitude for raising her with love despite their poverty.

Strangely enough, she only cried in the beginning; and what filled her mind wasn't the memory of better days, but an image of her parents' peaceful expressions. It was a fantasy and not reality, but it remained alive in her as a saving grace and symbol of her fondest wish.

This gave Loki a clear heart, and having a solid goal, she trained harder than anyone else.

The harsh training gave her new bruises each day. After two years, she got used to it. Many trainees dropped out. There were also those who got injured and lost their ability to become Magicmasters, but so far no one had died. Fortunately, the facility thoroughly enforced safety rules.

Eventually, Loki gained abilities that far surpassed the others of her age. She learned close-combat martial arts to fight humans, how to negotiate the Outer World, and magic, pulling it all together to form a type of combat

arts. This was all thanks to her feelings for her parents, which gave her a clear goal.

At the time, there was nobody left to spar with Loki... aside from one.

She had thought he looked too weak to serve as her opponent. But after several mock battles, she was always the one crawling on the ground. It was like fighting one of the adults.

Loki began spending her days devoting herself to practice so that she could defeat him, polishing her skills and spirit.

But the curtain fell on those days in the blink of an eye. Before long, that boy who was one year older than her had suddenly disappeared.

That black-haired boy was the only one to surpass her in physical abilities and mana control. Loki's one-sided desire not to lose to him pushed her forward, chasing after his small back, and enabled her to continue her harsh training.

She was forced to admit that it was that boy's existence in the back of her mind that was responsible for her astonishing growth. Before she knew it, he had become something inexplicable, exceeding any ordinary rival.

She'd never talked to him, and she didn't know his name.

He only ever showed himself during matches, in which he calmly defeated his fellow trainees, and finally wordlessly facing down Loki in mock battles. For the most part, he easily sidestepped the magic she'd learned as well as the martial arts she'd refined, resulting in one-sided matches; but she could feel herself growing stronger just by sparring with this boy.

However, one day the boy simply stopped showing up to the training grounds. Loki thought he dropped out of the training.

Despite him being so strong that she'd come to admire him, she was aware that this was just that kind of place.

Two years passed.

As an unexpectedly large number of Fiends advanced against the humans, humanity's first line of defense was breached, causing massive casualties.

This forced all the Magicmasters to work together in a great defensive battle, and they somehow managed to annihilate the invading forces. And Alpha, that had survived the harsh trial, moved out to kill the remaining Fiends.

But they lacked Magicmasters, having suffered so many casualties. That's when they turned to Loki and the other trainees.

They'd already completed basic training and received their Magicmaster licenses, so it wouldn't be strange for them to be ordered to move out... so long as their ages were ignored.

The dozen or so trainees formed a single unit. At first, they were brimming with confidence, even cracking jokes. But that only lasted until they encountered a Fiend...

It was an overwhelming and humiliating first encounter. The majority fell to their knees with fear before the grotesque Fiend.

And who would blame them? They were only around 11 years old, and the Fiend's presence was enough to intimidate their young and immature minds.

Facing Loki and the others was a Fiend that looked like a large carnivorous beast. It had skin as black as charcoal, with an abnormally large mouth. This creepy being didn't look like it belonged in their world, appearing as a monstrosity.

The familiar faces of Loki's fellow trainees were trampled one after another.

Escaping from the Fiend's mouth opening sideways was an unbearable stench. At the same time a thicket of razor-sharp fangs were laid bare.

In between the fangs were the shredded remnants of its victim already cut to pieces by the powerful jaw, and dissolved by the abnormal digestive fluids and saliva, changing even their shapes and colors.

With a trembling body and arm, Loki tried to use magic.

"—!!" But her magic, which she'd been able to use whenever she pleased, ended up misfiring. Fear overtook her mind and she became unable to perceive mana. "W-Why...!!"

Her knees buckled, and she couldn't take her eyes off of the Fiend emotionlessly devouring the young lives.

Someone's blood splattered over Loki's face. The blood of her familiar allies mixed together into a single color and stuck to her pale lips and cheeks.

She continued mouthing meaningless words, her lips trembling. Her eyes blankly reflected the gruesome scene in front of them, as she continued in a delirious attempt to complete an incantation. "Why, how, why why why why..." But nothing was working.

Before she knew it, Loki was the only one left. She felt the ferocious Fiend turn its attention to her small and powerless form. Its mouth seemed to curve, almost as if it were smiling.

In front of that sadistic repulsive Fiend, Loki even forgot her pointless incantation and lowered her face in fear. Tears flowed with no end in sight, her teeth chattered, and eventually something lukewarm and wet ran down her thighs.

Her heart had given up.

She would come to an end, unable to do anything, just like her allies she'd spent her life training with. Her dream of giving her parents a burial had come to a quick end upon entering the Outer World. She'd been naïve, she'd been confident in her strength, but reality had easily betrayed her.

Loki's eyes closed. She silently apologized in her mind. *I'm sorry. Father, Mother...*

Even with her eyes shut, she could tell the Fiend was approaching. The thick smell of blood drifted through the wind and wrapped around her. That meant the Fiend had opened its hellishly large mouth.

"Tsk... I didn't make it in time."

That inappropriate tongue-click resounded in Loki's ears. And it was followed by the sound of something massive collapsing to the ground.

Next—

"Are you okay?" The voice came from someone who hadn't reached puberty yet, and it was clearly directed toward Loki.

When Loki opened her tightly closed eyes, she blurrily saw black hair.

"You don't have to force yourself." The boy's small hand on her hand felt very warm. He looked around the area, speaking in a regretful tone: "I'm sorry I was late."

Loki still hadn't recovered from the fear and was unable to speak, so instead she rapidly shook her head. As her vision returned, she saw the young boy crouched down in front of her, his back facing her. "You probably can't move, so get on."

Remembering what happened, she closed her legs right away. Had the boy noticed... that she'd wet herself.

"Don't worry about it." The words were probably him showing consideration for her. He continued, more forcefully, "If you don't get on, I'll just carry you."

He said the last part with irritation, leaving no room for Loki to say no. Seeing the young boy change his attitude and forcibly take action made her realize she had no right to refuse. Unable to stand on her shaking legs, she leaned her body on his small back, to which he responded by linking his arms under her rear end to keep her up.

He had to be feeling her damp underwear and drenched hem. In contrast to her body quivering with shame, the boy firmly held her up.

On the way back, the boy slaughtered any Fiends that appeared with seemingly no effort, using a single hand and while carrying Loki on his back. He didn't move as if he had someone on his back, and his skills were spectacular. He easily overpowered the enemies that she had struggled against, or rather been defeated by. He dispatched of them like garbage in a single blow.

Eventually, Loki was taken aback by the sight of a familiar building coming into view.

After studying a map many times over, it was something she'd engraved in her mind. "Wait!! Let me down here."

Perhaps due to having seen the boy completely destroy the Fiends, and instantly, Loki's fear had temporarily subsided. It was similar to the numbness born from shock, but because of it she didn't miss her chance.

The boy seemed like he would ignore Loki's sudden outburst, but hearing her desperate appeal, he listened. "Three minutes." After saying that, he slowly put her down by the roots of a large tree.

Loki glanced around, confirming her surroundings before muttering, "There's no doubt about it."

She was staring at a decaying building with a peculiar shape. The markings that read *Fourth Military Outpost* were painted in a unique color and looked as though they might peel off at any moment.

Right next to that should be the place she'd heard about.

The traces of battle still looked fresh. In the past it had been a small but sturdy fortress. Crumbled pieces of the stone walls and rusted iron plates were scattered about, telling the story of how the place had tragically collapsed. But that wasn't what Loki was looking for.

This was the place where her parents had died.

She already knew. Three years had passed after all. Just imagining it was dreadful, but she'd be lying if she said she'd never thought about it. She was aware that Fiends ate the humans they killed, leaving no trace behind, and the battle that just happened had painfully beaten that fact into her.

She had no choice but to accept that there was nothing left of them.

"What's here?"

"This is where my parents died... or were reported to have died..."

The boy stopped walking. He muttered a brief "I see."

It only sounded like a simple acknowledgment. He had nothing else to say, but Loki didn't think he was cold-hearted. Because right now, even that short reply felt more kind than any comforting words.

The two found a sapling next to the outpost that had failed to accomplish its purpose. They raised a large rock to serve as a gravestone. And the young boy put his hands together, next to Loki. It was hard to tell what he was feeling based on his expression.

I'm sorry it took me this long. After saying this in her head, Loki turned to the boy as if she was fine now. "Thank you."

"... Don't worry about it."

In the end, it wasn't until several hours later when they reached the military base by the defense line, that Loki got a good look at his face. By then night had already fallen, and only the faint moonlight illuminated him. But it was the face of that black-haired boy one year older than her, the one she'd thought had dropped out.

He'd grown since then, so she hadn't been able to tell right away; but he still looked similar to how he was back then.

After stepping through the gate, he put Loki down and called to a nearby man, before blending in with the Outer World darkness once more.

The man, who appeared to be his superior, mentioned the boy's name during the boy's short report... and Loki made sure to burn it into her memory.

“Alus Reigin.”

Thanks to him, she had returned alive and been able to fulfill her years-old wish.

And now... she no longer had any goals. She didn't know what to do with her life.

But she found her answer surprisingly fast.

Then I'll be of help to him. I'll use my life for his sake.

Loki went on to continue refining her magic. She engaged in live combat and gained experience. But ironically enough, the stronger she became, the more aware she was that the boy was far above her.

I'm not going to be of any help to him like this.

Loki turned to the field of detection, which she knew she had an affinity for, deciding to open up her own future. She didn't hesitate in the slightest. It was all for the sake of being any help to him.

When Loki came to in the nurse's office, somebody was beside her.

Sitting on a chair was a black-haired young man with his arms crossed and eyes shut. He looked like he was asleep.

An orange-tinged light was coming through the curtains. It must be evening.

Unable to understand her situation, Loki surmised it based on her surroundings. She went through her memories around the mock battle, which were hazy. But she clearly remembered violating the taboo.

Her body felt warm, perhaps because she'd slept. As she slowly sat up, the bed cover rustled. It didn't seem to make a sound, but the young man in the chair quickly reacted.

“You're finally awake.” Holding back a yawn, he... Alus brought his hand to the back of his neck.

“I...”

Feeling guilty over having stained her hands by doing something as foolish as breaking the taboo, Loki stared down at the white bed.

“You won the bet,” Alus said, admitting defeat.

Loki looked at him, speechless. “...!”

Alus grinned, showing her his right sleeve. It was in tatters. “I took a hit.”

“But...”

Did clothes really count as part of the body? However, that was something Alus had decided, which was very welcome news to Loki.

But if anything—Loki was less concerned with the result and more with her having committed a taboo action. If the upper brass heard about it, she would obviously be punished. Considering that some time had passed since their match, the procedure for it may already be underway.

No order would be handed down to a Magicmaster in the military who had broken the law, regardless if they knew of her wish or not.

"I can't overlook you risking your life over something like that."

Yes, that was only natural. She hadn't just nearly lost her life, she was now a criminal. And it would be difficult for even the current No. 1 to protect her.

So, Loki simply waited for Alus to continue. Or rather, she didn't know what to say. She would likely be handed over to the custody of the military.

This wasn't the outcome Loki had wanted, but it was the result of using all means and powers available to her. That's why she had no choice but to accept it. Her methods might not have been forgivable, but in the end, she had no regrets.

That's right. I did everything I could... so I no longer—

She quietly closed her eyes, ready to face her fate.

But in the next moment, her face twisted in pain. "—!! Ow!"

A sudden chop struck her on the head. It was a slow chop, and though she'd reflexively let out a cry, it didn't hurt all that much.

But even then... Loki felt that the blow had a great seriousness behind it, and at the same time, compassion toward her. However, she didn't know why. At best, all she could do was look up at him with a questioning glance while holding her head.

"Well, I'll forgive you with this. You'll have to make up the rest through labor. I'll work you like a dog, so brace yourself." The edges of Alus' lips raised as he smiled at her, before turning his back to her and pointing behind him as if to say, 'Let's go.'

Her mana had been successfully supplemented. While she may have been recuperating, she should still be able to move.

Loki overflowed with happiness, feeling bliss that her gamble had paid off; but then the sparkle in her eyes and smile on her face dimmed over in an instant. That's right... she was now Alus' partner, as lowly as she might be, and she couldn't afford to do anything that might threaten his position. That was why—

"I did something unforgivable..." Loki hurriedly got up from the bed and ran up to Alus. She was trying to appeal to him, but he covered her mouth with his hand. Astonished, she looked at him, wondering what was going on.

Alus then slid the door open and—

"What are you doing?"

"Well, uhm..."

"Ahahaha..."

At the doorway were two faces. Their awkward expressions made it clear that their trespass couldn't be justified as simply a sudden impulse.

The two that had appeared on the other side of the door were Tesfia and Alice, seemingly eavesdropping. Having been thrown off their beat by the sudden opening of the door, they timidly looked up at Alus.

He only showed them an exasperated expression, yet it seemed that they knew they were guilty and couldn't escape a reprimand, so they couldn't even apologize.

Instead, Tesfia let out a very forced cough. As if she hadn't just been caught listening at the door, she spoke in a calm tone, which for the time being helped change the atmosphere. "I don't remember seeing her before. Who is she?" she asked, leaning over to peek at the girl behind Alus.

"She's a freshman, right? I don't think I know her, either." Alice seemed curious as well, peeking at Loki from the other side.

The matter of their eavesdropping was still up in the air, but Alus didn't seem to care all that much. Alice was one thing, but if he were to criticize Tesfia for everything like that there'd be no end in sight... Besides, this was a good opportunity to introduce Loki.

"I guess I'll introduce you to her. This is my new partner, Loki."

"—!!"

Even Loki was unable to hide her surprise at his statement. It was what she'd wished for, but she couldn't honestly rejoice. "But..." she quietly muttered, so that Tesfia and Alice couldn't hear.

Alus leaned over and whispered back into her ear, "Only the principal and I were there. Concealing the matter is simple. Or would you prefer we handed you over?" He flashed a devilish smile, to which Loki shook her head.

If her wish couldn't be realized, she might have despaired. But now she had a place of her own within arm's reach.

"Then there's no problem."

The way Alus forced his way through was just like the Alus that Loki had known.

She stepped to the side out of Alus' shadow, appearing before the two girls. Thanks to his words, the distress Loki had felt had completely disappeared. And her heart began racing from the exaltation she felt.

"I'm Loki Leevahl." She had a big smile on her face, and there were a few tears in her eyes.

After the two introduced themselves, Tesfia got right into it. "M-More importantly... partner?"

"W-What kind of partner?" Alice asked, having lost her composure. Unusual for her, she was blushing and her smile was twitching.

As Alus had business to attend to, rather than just brushing off the pair's disgraceful behavior, he chose to pretend he didn't see it. They were probably thinking of something completely pointless anyways. "I've got somewhere to stop by, so get to the laboratory ahead of me."

"Yes, Sir Alus."

"... Sir?" Tesfia and Alice stared at Loki, who was busy respectfully bowing to Alus.

"Then let's go," Loki said. "Unfortunately, I don't know where it is, so I must beg you two, Sir Alus' friends, to guide me there."

"S-Sure."

When Loki spun around to face Tesfia and Alice, her expression had changed to an emotionless one.

They left the main building where the nurse's office was located, and walked to where Alus' laboratory was on foot rather than use the Circle Port. That wasn't just because Loki didn't have the insignia necessary to use it, but also because Tesfia and Alice had a lot of questions they wanted to ask her.

"... A partner refers to someone who supports a Double Digit or higher Magicmaster in the Outer World and who detects Fiends," Loki bluntly explained, having had the question foisted on her.

"I see. So there are things like that too... but Alus is attending the Institute, so does he really need one?"

Loki's eyebrows twitched a little at Alice's casual words, but neither Alice nor Tesfia noticed it. "Sir Alus may be attending this Institute, but as long as he's with the military he will have to move out if the order comes."

"Hmm, that guy sure has it tough, too."

Hearing Tesfia's rude remark made Loki's brows twitch some more, and she narrowed her eyes. "With Sir Alus' abilities that can't be helped. He seems to be having it tough even now."

"But will that unmotivated Al even obey those kinds of orders?" Tesfia said jokingly with a jeering smile. Alice covered her mouth and giggled.

Seeing this, Loki stared at the two with a scornful look, and angrily interjected, "It seems that you two don't understand just how much Sir Alus has contributed to humanity as the current No. 1."

"Eh...!"

"Ah?!"

The two girls stopped in their tracks.

Loki continued walking forward for a few steps, before turning to face them. There was clear irritation in her eyes toward these two ignorant girls. "I said that you don't seem to understand that Alpha is only this peaceful because of Sir Alus. If you did, then you wouldn't be calling him 'Al' or 'that guy.'" She returned to her usual emotionless expression, but the way she'd spoken the words was filled with contempt.

It took a little while before Tesfia and Alice returned to their senses from the shock.

"I don't know about that. But I do admit that he's No. 1, and I understand that he's put in more effort and gone through more hardships than I can imagine. I don't know how hard Al has fought to protect this country... but since I can't even imagine it the way I am now, there's no point in thinking about it," Tesfia said.

"That's true," Alice said. "Al is so far beyond us that he's too distant to properly respect and set as our goal... It's like, he's several levels above us, so it doesn't feel quite real."

"Just like how we don't know what Al was like in the military, you don't know what he's like here. I guess the closest thing he is to us is a classmate with a screw or two loose."

"..." Loki knew how much Alus had sacrificed for the sake of the nation. So there was a big gap between her and these girls. At the same time, it also meant that Tesfia and Alice were still inexperienced.

"Besides, I don't think Al would mind it," Alice mused.

"Yeah. He'll do him, so it's not your place to butt in," Tesfia admonished Loki.

It was probably due to Loki's appearance that Tesfia wasn't flaring up at her. When she was expressionless, she looked young for her age, so Tesfia felt like she was dealing with a younger sister.

Loki decided to restrain her opinion. Of course, it wasn't as though she'd completely accepted their points, but this was a problem born from her perception as a Magicmaster. Even if she explained Alus' greatness to them, the way they were now, they wouldn't understand.

As a result, she resigned herself to the fact that there was a clear difference between them. But she also felt a strange satisfaction that she was the only one that truly understood how amazing Alus was. "I accept that if that's what Sir Alus said, then you're right that it's not my place to intervene." Loki didn't think she'd done anything wrong though, so she didn't apologize.

After that, she decided to mentally distance herself from the two, and the journey of a few minutes to the laboratory felt strangely long. But unfortunately, she was the only one who felt that way. And the reason for that was the barrage of questions that Tesfia and Alice continued to launch at her.

"... And now, the two of you are receiving training and guidance from Sir Alus?"

Alice's words had already affirmed it, but Loki's eyes opened wide, and envy and jealousy bubbling up from within made her unable to remain calm.

Unaware of Loki's reaction, Alice answered her: "Yes. But we only just started."

"I see. I thought he transferred to the Institute for the sake of his research."

"Hmm... that's what Al himself says, so I think that's true. But a lot of things happened, and he ended up looking after us." Alice scratched her cheek in an apologetic manner.

"Well, he's the one saying he'll look after us," Tesfia said. "Not that I've heard about Alus' circumstances. Honestly, I think we're quite an inconvenience. But even then, for the sake of my dream of becoming a Magicmaster, I won't hesitate to use any means possible," she finished bashfully.

There was no way Loki would be happy with the way Tesfia was talking about Alus' training of them. She was essentially confirming her ignorance, and spoke as someone who could indulge in peace. She could speak of pipe dreams and ideals, unaware that she was irresponsibly pushing her expectations upon the strong.

As Loki rarely showed emotion, she was aghast on the inside... truly disappointed in the world. Why would Sir Alus ever instruct these ignorant girls? What was the point of him even coming here...

Loki honestly felt disgust. But not at the girls. She just simply couldn't imagine that they lived in the same world. That's why, in order to maintain her presence of mind, she focused on gathering information.

Despite the short distance, the two girls stopped from time to time to give Loki explanations on the Institute and its facilities. To Loki this was an unwelcome favor, and the three took what seemed like a long time to get to their destination.

Only a month had passed since Tesfia and Alice met Alus, but no matter how much they talked about him, it wasn't enough.

As they happily talked about Alus, Loki began feeling a different emotion, aside from her anger. She was sensitive to discussions about Alus. These two had seen a side of Alus that she hadn't... When she thought like that, Loki felt a little envious and quietly listened to their conversation.

* * *

"I'm glad you decided to look after that girl."

"..."

Alus was in Principal Sisty's office. He was seriously glad she'd made that remark before he had tea in his mouth. While he didn't spit out any tea, he did feel like he'd had a sharp blade pressed up against him. But since retorting would just be playing into her hands, Alus held it in and fixed his grip on the teacup he'd been about to drop, and took a sip instead.

On the other side of the desk was Sisty, who smiled happily. She also put a piece of paper on the desk, as if to say she'd expected this.

"And this is?"

"This is the application for Loki's admission procedure. Of course she's already signed it, and obviously she passes in terms of ability."

"I see you're rather prepared."

He'd come here to get the principal to keep quiet about the incident, but it seemed it hadn't been necessary. In other words, she'd prepared everything ahead of time.

Alus wasn't happy to realize he'd been dancing in the principal's palm. But at the same time, he was glad this could be resolved quickly. Still seated, he gave Sisty a nod as a show of gratitude. "So, you're telling me to bring her under my wing and train her?"

"Well, something like that... but I have some personal investment in this, so don't worry about it too much. The military pushed her onto me as a supervisor for you, but not everything is going according to the Governor-General's plan. It's more of a show. Simply put, the Governor-General and I are just middlemen," Sisty said with a bitter smile.

With Alus accepting Loki as his partner, it wasn't something that could be overturned. "Like you said—Loki's more capable than I thought. Does she seriously have a four-digit rank? In terms of combat prowess, she's

close to Double Digits." Alus still remembered the doubt he'd felt during the mock battle.

"Loki's highest ranking is 157," the principal said. She smiled wryly while uncrossing her legs. "Despite that, Loki moved over to being a supporter without any regrets. She'd always had an aptitude for detection. But in the end, she never partnered up with anyone, resulting in a drop to her current ranking."

That didn't make sense to Alus. While entering the upper ranks as a spotter, a supporting Magicmaster, ensured good treatment, the actual rewards weren't any higher than a Double or Triple Digit. So Loki choosing the path of support couldn't have been for monetary reasons.

"You'll have to get the rest from Loki," Sisty said, essentially saying he wouldn't get any more from her.

"It's a bit late for that." Alus could no longer turn back. If he had ordered her to go to the frontlines she might've listened, but becoming his partner was something she'd risked her life over. He didn't know what her reasons had been, though.

Alus drank up the remaining tea, and rose from his chair. "My only business was to keep you quiet about the taboo. I'm glad that was a wasted effort." Well, being able to confirm the principal's intentions was a good outcome.

He turned his back on her and tried to leave. Which was when Sisty dropped a new bomb on him. "Oh, I still haven't received any hush money yet."

"...!!"

Alus' hand stopped just short of the door knob. "You want some kind of favor? Are you serious?"

The incident had happened in part because of the principal thrusting Loki on him, so she was partly responsible as well. Despite that, she couldn't overlook Alus treating it like it was no concern of his.

However—

"Part of the responsibility does lie with me. But with Loki committing a taboo because of you, I'll need to take a considerable risk to cover for her," Sisty said, putting a finger on her chin as if troubled.

Seeing this, Alus became convinced this was the reason she was called the Witch. The nerve, or perhaps the shamelessness to admit her own mistakes and still want compensation for shouldering that risk...

Alus' cheek twitched. He said in a monotone voice, "I understand. And if possible, I'd like to settle this with currency." While Alus was a student, he was below Sisty. Unless she asked for something preposterous, he had no choice but to obey.

"Unfortunately, I have enough money."

He wanted to retort, but didn't have the time to give her a sarcastic response.

Sisty brought up a suggestion she'd likely prepared ahead of time. "Let's see. Can I count on you during the extracurricular lesson? We need your strength."

Well, he figured it would be something like that. To begin with, even Sisty didn't know what to do in this situation, and he'd realized that she'd need his help. It was because she was so desperate for his aid that she'd asked for this absurd favor.

The extracurricular lesson meant to serve as live combat training would occur in a month's time. The two of them had discussed the matter in the past, but when it came to the uncertain elements, they'd failed to reach an acceptable conclusion.

The participating students would be split up into teams of five, each with a supervisor. And they'd had no choice but to give upperclassmen the role of supervisors. While they might be older, they were still students, and lacked combat experience. Though the military had demanded it, it was reckless at best, and they couldn't help but feel uneasy when they imagined the worst possible outcome.

"Not even I can protect all the students."

This was the truth. While he might be the strongest Magicmaster, he couldn't protect all of the students who would be spread out over a wide area. In short, this was no easy request.

"I'm fine with that. As long as you're there, we can reduce the possible number of casualties." It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Alus would still have a better chance to clear out all of the Fiends on his own.

"About that—you're not telling me to only help the students when they're in danger, are you?"

"Well, maybe a little... they do have to get some experience, after all..." Sisty said, and looked away.

"... If they move around all willy-nilly, there's not much I can do. I don't think I'll be of much use on this one."

"I was only kidding! I'll give them detailed instructions, so please..."

It was unclear whether she was apologizing, or trying to forcibly pull him in, but the principal rubbed Alus' black hair with a too-cheerful smile. She was acting like an innocent little girl, rather than her own age.

Alus felt she was being very sly, but didn't say this out loud. Instead, he tried to show her how much of a pain it was with his eyes, which she splendidly ignored. "I understand."

"Then we'll talk again this evening," said Sisty with a seductive smile full of affection. If someone had been listening in, they might have misinterpreted it as the principal flirting with her student.

But since Alus had no choice but to accept, he at least made a show of sighing as loudly as he could, as he left Sisty's office.

After confirming the door was closed, Sisty's expression returned to being serious, and she sighed as well.

The reason was Loki... "Does he not remember Loki?"

Sisty had already heard the rough circumstances from Loki. Why an active Magicmaster had become a supporter. Loki was prepared to risk her life when she asked to become Alus' partner. When Sisty heard that it was the only reason Loki lived for, she couldn't disregard it.

As a result, things had worked out almost as well as they could for her, but Sisty chose not to ask if Alus remembered Loki. No matter how much she was trying to smooth things over, to ask him that would overstep her boundaries.

In the end, it was their problem. Everyone else was an outsider.

She wondered what the truth was, but it was something only the almighty knew.

Fourth Chapter: The Ball at Night

Alus left the principal's office to return to his room.

He hadn't brought it up back then because it would've been poor taste, but he had gotten Sisty's word that she would keep quiet about the measures he'd taken to keep Loki alive. However... was that enough against the Witch?

He left the main building as he mulled this over. By now, the sun had almost set and more than half the sky had gone dark.

Alus continued to walk, dragging a long shadow behind him.

In order to save Loki from the taboo she'd committed, he had taken emergency measures that needed to be kept confidential.

Not even Sisty who'd been watching from the sidelines should know exactly what he'd done. She should only have seen the end result of it.

But the truth was that he had overwritten all of Loki's mana with his own to save her. And he was well aware this was far worse than a taboo.

The superpower—if you could call it that—that Alus had been born with was that his mana had the nature of devouring mana. Like the way Fiends worked, the devoured mana strengthened him.

He now had it under control, but it was this nature of his that had forced him to learn mana control.

Alus had two types of mana inside of him. One was the energy everyone had inside of them... and the other...

The strange wriggling mana that Loki saw during the mock battle was Alus' real mana, and it had a will of its own. It had only one craving and desire... and that was to devour, feasting on any and all mana.

In that sense, it moved as it desired. And only Alus and Governor-General Berwick knew how much he'd trained to bring it under control. He'd only used it this time because it was unavoidable.

On top of that, this danger had befallen him because he'd acknowledged Loki's talent and strength of will. As a result, he used this power to devour Loki's mana, while also pouring normal mana into her. If her body had rejected the foreign mana, there was a chance that she could have died.

Fortunately, it had meshed well with her—but perhaps that wasn't an accurate description. As Loki had run out of mana, Alus' own mana was able to enter her body and substitute for the remaining mana being drained by the catalyst.

Alus predicted that the remaining mana inside of her would eventually decay, and its remnants would be pushed out by the new mana generated within her. It would depend on Loki if the results ended up as good or bad, but it wasn't a gamble Alus ever planned on using again.

Aside from that... Alus was puzzled by his own change in behavior since entering the Institute. He was doing things he'd never have done in the military, one after another.

To begin with, he would've refused to help Tesfia and Alice with their training in the past. In fact, he'd always rejected all kinds of relationships.

Alus wasn't one to cling to his No. 1 rank, but he'd received quite a few benefits from it. As Magicmasters active in the Outer World received a high salary, he had an excessive amount of money. So even if he were to lose his position due to the politics in play, he didn't think it would hurt him that much. Not even Sisty could really get in his way.

In fact, he'd never thought about protecting humanity even once. If humanity were to die out, he could just spend the rest of his days alone... but that kind of selfish feeling wasn't as powerful inside him nowadays.

He found himself strangely acclimated to that change, and rather than struggle against it, he was fine with letting it carry him away, almost as if he'd stopped being himself.

Alus didn't know if this was what they called 'growing up.' But even with the times being as unreasonably hectic as they were, he could feel a kind of satisfaction growing in a corner of his mind.

Well, Alus' grand plan wasn't going to change. As long as he could take it easy, it was fine.

The other things didn't really matter. Though that's what he told himself, he came to the somewhat illogical conclusion that he could at least enjoy himself for now.

* * *

"Hey, my laboratory isn't your hangout," Alus said in an exasperated manner at the three girls sitting about.

"I'm very sorry, Sir Alus," Loki shot up from her seat and apologized.

It hadn't been that serious a thing, and Alus had been thinking about talking to Loki about the way she addressed him and such.

"What does it matter? We were getting to know each other better." Tesfia was sitting next to Loki and was patting her silver hair.

Loki's eyebrows twitched for an instant, but only Alus noticed.

"Dear little Loki is so cute, after all." Next it was Alice's turn. She was standing behind Loki and brushed Tesfia's hand away to hug the smaller girl.

Loki raised her eyebrows again, but maintained an emotionless expression, like a doll.

Alus was fine with them getting along, but that was if it took place outside the laboratory. If they were going to be here and not train, he wanted them to get out.

But he didn't start with that. First, he had to make Tesfia and Alice understand their place. The edges of his lips raised to a grin. "Just so you know, Loki's highest ranking is 157."

"—!!"

It seemed they finally understood what they'd done. Alice's eyes opened wide and her expression froze.

"N-No way..." Tesfia said with a trembling voice. If they hadn't been the words of the current No. 1, she probably would have laughed at them.

"Since she's participated in a lot of battles, her abilities are on par with a Double Digit."

"Really?" Tesfia was flustered. She looked at Loki, who was awkwardly being hugged by Alice.

"They're not, compared to Sir Alus." That's when Loki's expression softened for the first time. She tried to play it off as being modest, but having Alus himself acknowledge her efforts filled her with happiness.

Alus used this truth to light a fire under the two. "Loki's a year younger, but the principal gave her permission to let her transfer into the same year as you, which means that you two are now second to her."

Tesfia's expression froze when she imagined her position being in danger. It was at times like these that a noble's pride got in the way.

Alice was simply happy to have Loki enrolled at the Institute, but she wasn't sure if she should honestly express her joy.

"I know you two are competent, but I have no obligation to monitor anything other than your training, so at this rate I'd be better off spending time on Loki."

"—!!"

Alus didn't think he was being even a little mean. In fact, Loki looked more likely to be able to guide him to a bright future as his support. With Loki as his partner, he probably didn't have the time to train her as well as the other two.

That said, it was up to the girls to accept that as the truth, and decide what to do. But if their wills were weak enough to break over this, they likely never would have asked him for his guidance.

Alus had intended them to keep up with the training, and it seemed that it was working perfectly.

"We were just taking a little break." Tesfia rolled up her sleeves, as if to say they'd been training until just a few minutes ago.

"... That's true. I guess we'll have to save our discussion on enchantments with dear Loki until another time." Alice was still clinging onto Loki and carefully stroking her hair. Her words and actions weren't matching up. It seemed her urge to cherish the tiny Loki had overpowered her reservation based on Loki's rank.

"I don't have the time, so get to your training and then leave."

After that, the sight of training Alus was so familiar with returned to the room. Alice still hesitated to let go of the adorable doll that was Loki, but with Loki herself moving away from her, she got to training with slumped shoulders.

That's when Alus remembered the exam the two had been so fired up about. "By the way, how did your mock battles go?" he nonchalantly asked. He wasn't that interested, but he wanted to confirm how depressed the two

would get due to their difference in strength. Bluntly put, his question was meant to harass them.

The two girls twitched, and the flow of mana they were training on dispersed.

“...”

“Ahaha...”

Considering their responses, they hadn't been able to win.

“Do you want to know?” Tesfia asked.

“That's fine. I can more or less guess how it went. I'm glad you went through a bitter experience.”

Tesfia responded to Alus' sarcasm with stubbornness, determined to tell him how it went, and she took Alice down with her. The gist of it was that Tesfia's examiner was that Delca Base that they'd talked about during the exam. And it ended in a crushing defeat. Tesfia had gone at it enthusiastically, but hadn't even gotten close. She cast spells, which were then blocked, and even her Icicle Sword was skillfully evaded.

After that, Tesfia was forced on the defensive and then defeated without being able to do anything.

Meanwhile, Alice's opponent was Felinella, the strongest student in the Institute aside from Alus.

Alice had gone at it, knowing she was dealing with someone superior to her, but everything she did was easily sidestepped. Once it was over, Felinella told her “Good work” with a composed expression, and urged her to take her leave.

The two had convinced themselves that they'd be able to hold their own, but the results spoke for themselves. There was always a bigger fish out there. And just having understood that was a valuable experience.

After Alus confirmed the results of the exam, he sat down at his desk and spread out a map. Half a step behind him was Loki. It seemed she wanted to make that her personal spot.

Of course it wouldn't disrupt Alus' focus, but even if she was his partner, wasn't it unnatural for a male and a female to be together around the clock...?

“Is that supposed to be an enchantment?” Loki asked, glancing at the two girls. She was referring to their unsightly training.

Alus answered her, without looking up from the map. “It seems like those two have gotten complacent because of me. Well, I guess it's not just them.”

Loki vehemently denied Alus' self-criticism. “Not at all! You saved humanity, Sir Alus... it's their fault for lacking awareness. It's not your fault at all. Alpha's rising population is all thanks to your efforts. Those girls just don't understand.”

Alus glanced at Loki out of the corner of his eye, as she moved past resentment and straight into sadness. “What can you do... if I go away, what will Alpha do? If an S-class shows up, it won't even last a few days.” That's

what the military's top brass had their misgivings about. They tended to prioritize self-preservation, so with Alus requesting retirement, they'd had to revise their plans.

That resulted in Alus' time being stolen, but the extracurricular lesson they'd proposed could also be considered a plan for the sake of the country's future, depending on how you looked at it. "I don't care what happens with the top brass, but in order for me to have a quiet life from here on, I'll need to do something about that concern."

Loki now realized why Alus had left the military to devote himself to research. She then decided to ask him about something even more perplexing.

But before that... she moved her gaze from Alus to the girls. When Loki had been in the military, she'd done similar training; but the way the girls looked, their results were limited and ungainly.

"So will those girls really be useful?"

"Possibly. They're supposedly among the excellent students of the Institute," Alus said, as if it didn't concern him. He used a red marker to draw lines and signs on the map.

"Then why would you be teaching them the basics?" Loki said in a blunt tone. It was less of a question and more of an expression of dissatisfaction.

"The principal pushed them onto me. Besides, this is another way."

"What is?"

"If they become at least Double Digits, that'll mean I can take it easier, right?" Of course, the seeds sown now might not bud until much later. But Alus figured it would at least work as a backup plan.

"Then you mean, they have that much hidden talent?"

"Who knows." There were walls that couldn't be conquered by talent and effort alone. Alus believed it would be their will to live that would determine if they could overcome them. "In the end, it's those that survive that reach the top."

Having experienced several battles, Loki could somewhat understand what Alus was saying. Anyone could lose their life in an instant, no matter how strong or talented. A surprise attack, encountering an unconfirmed Variant, and so on... there were countless possible reasons.

Both Alus and Loki had seen plenty of Magicmasters go like that. Very few Magicmasters went out in a blaze of glory on the battlefield. They'd been made painfully aware that the only thing that mattered was if you won or lost, and if you survived or not.

Finally, Alus tapped a point on the map. "And we'll find out soon enough."

"..." Loki didn't know the meaning behind his gesture, but she also didn't think Alus would tell her all of his intentions. She didn't want to overstep her boundaries. As his partner, she only needed to help Alus. She'd never asked to do anything more. And for his sake, she'd gladly be a sacrificial

pawn if need be. That's why she made her own will clear. "I will follow you, Sir Alus."

"I see... I understand your determination."

Loki was satisfied with just that exchange. After all, she was finally living the life she desired.

However—

"In that case, you'll need to gain enough skill to be suitable for me too, Loki," Alus said, sitting deep in his chair, with his eyes on the map.

"Normally, I wouldn't choose someone at your level as my partner. But the reason I did anyway is because I have hopes for your future."

"—!!"

Alus had brought up his expectations for the future to stir up Loki's sense of danger, but Loki didn't hesitate to answer. "I will definitely live up to your expectations."

In contrast to her powerful words, her expression was the same as normal. Loki's inner thoughts were concise and clear, with no doubts. She said exactly what she intended, with no other meanings mixed in. At the very least, there wasn't a hint of concern about her ability to live up to Alus' expectations in her voice.

"Your detection radius is around 1 km, isn't it." Alus wasn't attempting to confirm it. He had said it being well aware of her capabilities.

Loki nodded.

"I'm around the same, depending on the situation." That range was more than good enough for practical use. When Alus was in the military, there were rumors that he didn't take on partners because he was good at detecting on his own.

Apparently that was the truth. Having it confirmed by the young man himself shook Loki.

"I need you to have a detection radius of at least 5 km."

The only spotters that had such a high detection radius were Single Digit spotters, and you could count all of them on one hand. And Loki knew how reckless of a request it was even more so than Alus. But even then—"I understand."

She didn't say it was impossible. It was no longer a matter of possibilities. She had to do it, and she had the determination for it. If she couldn't, she would lose her will to live.

Alus knew how difficult it would be to achieve the level he was demanding. But at the same time, Loki wouldn't be of any use to him in combat otherwise.

"Of course, I'll have you increase your combat skills too, but we'll prioritize your detection radius." He drew a semicircle at the 1 km mark on the map. That suggested Loki wasn't unrelated to this matter. But he didn't say anything else, partly because Tesfia and Alice were still in the room.

Thinking it was a good time, Alus called out to the girls. "Let's leave it at that for today. I have business with the principal."

It seemed they were finally making progress. And since Alus had ended it just as she was getting into it, Tesfia turned around with a frown. But if she wanted to continue, she could just do it in her room, so Alus ignored her.

As for Alice, she appeared to be getting a feel for it, as she was focusing and didn't appear to have heard him.

Geez, thought Alus.

In the end, it took some time to forcibly send Tesfia and Alice home.

But in the next moment... "What are you doing?" Tesfia turned around in the doorway and called out to Loki with a suspicious look.

Alice followed suit, glancing at Loki still in the room, with a puzzled expression. They were returning to the girls' dorm, and as an Institute student the two assumed that Loki would be coming back with them. "Loki, dear?"

Loki remained expressionless. As she was transferring in today, the preparations for her moving into the dorm weren't complete. But that aside, she was in Alus' room. In other words, they couldn't leave a girl alone in a boy's room as night was approaching.

"I am Sir Alus' partner, so it's only natural we would live and sleep together. So don't worry about it." Loki was perfectly composed, speaking without a trace of resentment.

The two girls were surprised, while Alus slapped his forehead with a "Damn it" and a sullen look. To him and Loki this wasn't particularly unusual. It was common in the military, and even if they shared a room nothing would happen. "Loki, normally you're supposed to live separately."

This was a difference in perception due to growing up in the military. It was to be expected, as Loki lacked even a general education. Even Alus first found out about it when he entered the Institute, and realized the dorms were separated based on gender.

In the military they were usually separated as well, but neither Alus nor Loki focused on those kinds of subtleties, and there were plenty of exceptions when it came to partners getting to know each other better.

"..." Loki closed her mouth. While she didn't let it show, she was holding a vote inside her head. And after a moment's pause—"I refuse."

She declared this without hesitation. The opposing view had been voted down in her mind.

As far as Alus was aware, this was the first time she'd gone against his opinion. The fact that it was his opinion had weighed heavily in her mind, but there were exceptions to everything. And in her mental vote, her own desires were given the top priority.

There was no doubt that she'd manipulated her decision by the justification of being able to help Alus more by staying close to him. The goal of supporting Alus had expanded to his life in general, not just combat duties. As such, Loki's mental vote was unanimous. With nobody to raise a different opinion, the bill to live together was immediately passed.

"But... Won't that be inconvenient in a lot of ways?" Alice asked in a roundabout manner, after glancing at Alus for a moment.

"It's common in the military. There won't be anything inconvenient for Sir Alus."

Having understood the hidden feelings within Loki's words, both Tesfia and Alice blushed.

"Absolutely not!" Tesfia snapped back with an objection.

But Loki showed no signs of backing down. "This has nothing to do with you. It's a matter between Sir Alus and myself, so you bystanders can kindly go home."

"...!!"

"B-But..."

Neither Tesfia nor Alice could say anything back to that clear statement.

And Loki continued to attack. "In that case, why don't you two also live together with Sir Alus? Like I said, this happens a lot in the military." She meant it as sarcasm, but being expressionless it was difficult to tell if she was serious or joking. Partly because of that, it gave way to an unexpected misunderstanding.

"You... don't tell me you've already..." Tesfia said.

"...!"

The two turned their eyes toward Alus. And they took a step back.

Alus didn't really care how they saw him, but frankly put, it was distressing. He came to the conclusion that they'd only waste time at this rate. For the time being... "Anyways, you two go home. I'm going to bring Loki with me to the principal either way."

The two girls still weren't satisfied, and they argued for a while longer. But in the end, Alus bringing up the principal proved effective, as they reluctantly went home.

"Pervert...!"

It was unclear if Alus heard Tesfia's scornful grumbling. But she was fortunate that Loki hadn't, because if she had, she almost certainly would've come out swinging.

And even if she didn't go that far, she'd never let an insult against Alus go unchecked.

* * *

Alus was overcome with mental fatigue, having finally managed to send Tesfia and Alice home.

Meanwhile, Loki was pumping her small fist. Her expression was unchanged, but her cheeks were flushed, and she appeared to be boasting her victory over her rivals. But only Loki knew the truth.

Next, Alus would need to take her with him to the principal's office. He got up from his chair and left the laboratory with heavy steps, followed by Loki.

The round moon shone down monotone light from a single point. It was the only source of light in the night sky.

Walking down a path, Alus looked up at the sky with vacant eyes. That was because he was gazing at a fake moon. The barrier separating the Outer World from the inside didn't let anything through. That's why this sight was just an added-on projection. At the same time, it was reproduced to the level where it was almost indistinguishable from the real thing. But even so, Alus felt this was wrong... that it was fake.

It was at times like these that he was nostalgic for the reality of the battlefields in the Outer World. That height of the moon, this precious illusion, which was unreachable to him even now as No. 1, certainly existed outside.

Behind the rhythmical footsteps walking on the pavement was another quieter set of footsteps.

Suddenly, Alus smelled the faint, sweet fragrance of flowers.

Despite having gone down this path several times before, this was the first time it registered in his mind. While wondering if he'd smelled this before, he immersed himself in the aroma.

Alus and Loki headed for the main building without exchanging a single word. It wasn't like they were being quiet because they had nothing to talk about.

It was just that Loki had been captivated by Alus' looking longingly at the sky.

A blissful smile appeared on her face.

* * *

As was her custom, Sisty was waiting in the principal's office, fully prepared.

On her desk was a detailed map of the area where the extracurricular lesson would take place. Next to it was a list of high-ranking students. She wasn't going to leave everything up to others, but preparing this thoroughly would have the opposite effect.

And though she wasn't relying on him completely, Alus could faintly tell that maybe seventy percent of the work relied on his participation. It was something anyone would get annoyed over, but as a result they could get to their own work quickly, so Alus didn't complain. "I'll have Loki work on this too."

Sisty nodded in satisfaction.

That's why he had brought Loki with him. With her, the Institute's No. 1 and 2 would be supporting the students.

Alus had made the rough plan in his room. But as it was labeled as a lecture, approval from above was needed to put any changes into action. Though detailed arrangements could be made later, general countermeasures urgently needed to be addressed.

"Let's start by making this place our headquarters," Alus said, pointing to a location on the map. "Loki will stay there and continuously detect Fiends. Apart from the supervising upperclassmen, we'll have additional personnel at headquarters that Loki can direct as reinforcements, as

necessary." Having someone who excelled at detection like Loki was a godsend for this plan.

Loki stood next to Alus, listening to him.

Next, Sisty turned to look at Alus, as if to say 'What about you?'

"I'm going to reduce the number of Fiends. Since I can't differentiate classes like Loki, I'll start by destroying any B and C-classes that she detects. I'm sure the students will be able to handle D-class and below."

The principal gave him a look that was a little timid and uncertain.

But Alus couldn't babysit them that much, so they'd just have to brace themselves. Normally, it was unreasonable to force this kind of live combat training onto first-year students.

Alus had a thing or two he wished he could say about having to cover for this careless plan, but since this was the military pushing their will through, nothing would come from complaining to the principal. In a sense, they were both victims.

"So, are you not going to do something, Sisty?" Alus said in retaliation. If the principal could move about, the plan would be easier to carry out.

"I need to stay at the main building in case of emergency. I'm planning on confirming the overall situation from there."

That was to be expected. As the principal was overseeing the exercise, she couldn't be wandering around in the Outer World or she'd risk being unable to respond in case of unforeseen events. Moreover, there was no guarantee that Sisty would need to seek the direction of the top brass.

Alus picked up the list of upperclassmen. It appeared to contain detailed information on the personnel. When he gave Sisty a 'Are you fine with this?' look, she easily confirmed it with a confident but baseless, "I'm sure you won't say anything."

It was a give and take situation. There was no way the students' personal information could measure up to the top-secret method Alus had used to save Loki. It wasn't an equal trade, but Alus simply looked through the list for now.

At the top of the list, of course, was second-year student Felinella Socalent. Not only was she the only Triple Digit student in the Second Magical Institute, but she also had live combat experience. That was probably because her father, Lord Vizaist, was a general. If she had live combat experience, her ranking made sense.

"So the highest she's subjugated is B-class Fiends, huh," Alus said.

"Oh, so you're talking about Ms. Felinella. What are you going to ask her to do?"

At that level, Alus could at least use her. "I'll have her supervise a team like the others. It'll be fine as long as the reinforcements are somewhat capable. But I want numbers. In order to help decrease the strain on Loki, I'd prefer to have plenty of available reinforcements."

There were no objections as of yet. Loki seemed to have a good grasp of her own role as well.

"It'll be a burden for you, Loki, but I'm still going to have you do it."

There was no way Loki would refuse. Instead, she said, "Don't I have to go help subjugate Fiends?"

"That won't be necessary. You just need to focus on giving out instructions. After all, someone greedy wants the students to get some experience too."

If Alus and Loki were to go at it, there was a chance they might subjugate too many of the Fiends. Alus on his own would need to make adjustments on the fly, so that problem would only be exacerbated with the two of them. Loki would get less time to shine, but her expression remained unchanged, as she nodded her consent.

"I'll leave the selection of supervisors to you, Sisty."

Sisty replied, "Since we've got the results of the exam in, I'll give the weaker teams the stronger supervisors."

Alus had intended his remark to be sarcastic, telling her to at least do that, but it seemed she'd already thought about it. That was a little disappointing... but with this, the parts of the plan that needed resolving quickly had more or less been settled. "Then it's decided. If there's nothing else, I'd like to leave. Is that all right?"

"I don't mind."

"Understood, madam."

Sisty smiled wryly at Alus' condescending and cynical answer.

But this wasn't the end. He was going to have the principal do her share of the work as well. At the very least, she would need to bring the alterations to the plan to the top brass.

"Then this is where we take our leave." There were still a lot of nitty-gritty details left undecided, but they'd managed to revise a lot of the plan.

"Good work today."

Loki returned the principal's words with a polite bow, while Alus gave her a sloppy wave. He'd done this much, so his attitude should be overlooked.

The principal sighed with an exasperated look, but that was none of his concern.

As Alus got moving, Loki respectfully opened the door for him. He didn't think that was how he should be treated, but since he didn't want to let her good intentions go to waste, he awkwardly moved out. He heard a giggle from Sisty behind him, but had no choice but to ignore it.

However, just as he crossed the threshold, he turned around and said, "That's right. Do prepare a simple combat uniform for me so my identity's not exposed." This somewhat problematic suggestion was his attempt at payback.

"Yes, yes." But Sisty's immediate response easily shut down his revenge.

On the way back, Loki stared at the black hair, slightly moving in the wind, in front of her.

That black hair that blended into the night hadn't changed since that day. This made her happy, and she found even their shared silence endearing. But unlike their walk to the principal's office, the silence on the way back didn't last long.

"Loki, where are you planning on staying tonight?"

"Uhm...!"

She was surprised. Not because the silence was suddenly broken, but because she'd assumed she and Alus were on the same page about this. "Can I not stay in your room, Sir Alus?" Just as Alus couldn't see Loki's face behind him, nor could she see his. They were connected only by their voices.

That said, Alus wasn't so dense as to miss Loki's timid desire. "And could you do something about that 'Sir'?" He wasn't one to mind titles, but if she was going to be at the Institute as a student, it would draw unnecessary attention. Not everyone would understand their relationship, either. Which would earn unwanted animosity from those around them.

"I can't budge on that," Loki firmly declared, as if she'd turned into a completely different person.

He couldn't see her expression, but could feel her unbending will. Sensing that it would take time to convince her, Alus shrugged as he continued to walk.

* * *

However, upon their return to the laboratory, a call signal rang out on the private channel, ending the silence between them.

"Sir Alus, I will answer it."

"No, it'll be faster if I get it."

If the ring tone had been more cheerful, the atmosphere wouldn't have felt this pessimistic. On second thought though... probably not. For starters, there were very few people that could call the laboratory.

And it was inevitable that gloom would overtake Loki's expression. "Then I'll prepare dinner..." she said, trying to be of as much use as she could.

It was commendable, but it was a different story if it would have any impact on Alus' decision to keep her around him. It *had* been a long time since Alus had had a proper dinner, though. That said, Loki's cooking skills were a mystery.

However, there wasn't much in the way of ingredients to cook with. While Alus hesitatingly told Loki that, she declared, "Leave it to me," with an unchanged expression.

As if trying to escape this conceivably bloodcurdling situation, Alus stood the virtual liquid crystal up, but it didn't show the other party's face. This was a private channel, and therefore it was confidential.

"Is something the matter, Gov..."

Alus swallowed the words he was about to say. Since this was a direct call from a key military figure, Governor-General Berwick, it was only

natural that Alus would be careful. As of late, his bad premonitions had often come true. And having Loki at his side would make it more difficult to keep information confidential.

He wasn't worried over petty things like that, but it hadn't even been a day since Loki arrived. And he felt like he was skipping several steps in the procedure for sharing information.

He put the intercom in his ear. "So? Did you call me for an update report?"

"If only that were the case, I could sleep easy." The Governor-General's tone sounded apologetic. But he'd only been able to let Alus stay away because of cases like this.

Alus had a general idea of what was going on, and cut straight to the chase. "Is it inside or outside?"

"Outside. I'm sorry this had to happen just as you were getting used to the Institute."

"Is that supposed to be sarcasm?"

"It's not. But from the sounds of it, this has been a good experience for you."

"Nothing has been going my way, you know."

After a stifled laugh, Alus heard Berwick warmly say, "I see... So you're enjoying it." He then continued in a businesslike tone, as the situation didn't allow him to be more casual: "Alus, I've sent you the coordinates. As for your squad—"

"I don't need one."

"That's true. I don't have any squads available that could properly deal with it, in any event. We never thought it would invade this quickly."

It was late at night. And considering the general characteristics of Fiends, having Alus go alone was the best choice. In fact, Alus had never had a squad accompany him. But that was in part due to his refusal to have one.

"I guess you can take it easy now, Governor-General."

"You don't need to say it like that. This isn't a choice I enjoy making either. If possible, I'd like not to rely on you all the time. Your target is an A-class. Our detectors picked up on it. It's too far for us to detect if there are any small fry with it."

"Understood. I've got to get up early tomorrow, so I'll make this quick."

"We're counting on you. End of communication."

Alus exhaled. Perhaps because he'd been too relaxed lately, he felt the need to empty his mind for a moment.

He then quickly got to work on preparations. He didn't need all that much equipment, but at the very least he would have to depart before someone started questioning him.

"Sir Alus?" Loki looked his way with a face that said she'd been expecting this. As his partner, she would normally accompany Alus whenever he was summoned by the military, but... just a simple "We're

going out for a moment” would have been enough for her. Especially when she saw the imposing AWR hanging off of his waist.

She wiped her hands and turned off the stove. “I’ll prepare right away.”

Alus stopped her as she passed by, placing a light hand on her forehead. “Hold up. You’re not officially my partner yet. It will only take effect once you’ve been registered with the military. Besides, there’s a lot we don’t know about each other. So it’s going to take more time if both of us go. On top of that, you’ve only just recovered. You know nothing good will come from forcing yourself.”

“...”

He had a point, but Loki couldn’t help but lament her helplessness, even if Alus was only worried for her. Alus was skilled enough at detection that he had never needed a partner. It was a harsh realization, but since she was actually unnecessary, it couldn’t be helped.

Having seen her skills up close, Alus knew she was good enough. But the Outer World was a terrifying place, and a general lack of preparation could be fatal. “Would you mind if I go alone today?” Most of all, he didn’t want to bring her. “I’ll be back soon. And then we can discuss how we’ll handle this in future... and my title, too.”

“I understand. Then when will you...” Loki stopped herself. A Magicmaster in the Outer World couldn’t make any estimations.

However, Alus gently patted her head. “I’ll be back before dinner cools.” With that, he left the laboratory.

Loki respectfully bowed to his retreating back.

It might have been just to put her mind at ease, but it had been a long time since Alus put a deadline on a mission. It was a refreshing feeling to have a place to return to, however new and undefined it was.

As being discovered by the teachers would be a pain, Alus stopped going down the stairs. He climbed through a window out on the veranda, and used the railing there to jump up to the roof.

There were still lights on at the Institute’s facilities that he could see. And the wind blowing past his neck invigorated him.

The air was moving through the gaps in his clothing, and rustled his hair, helping him to change gears. The slight updraft cooled off his mind and body, taking his gloomy feelings with it.

* * *

A rare scene was playing out this evening, as Tesfia sat on her bed and mulled over the thoughtless words she’d thrown at Al.

She’d come to regret saying them. Why did she always say whatever came to mind as her emotions dictated? She’d never minded it before. But now, she was starting to second guess herself.

It couldn’t be dismissed as simply a bad habit; and as she thought back on it, she began to hate herself for those flippant words unfit for nobility.

“But... he’s still a pervert.”

However, even saying it out loud didn't alleviate that strange sensation in her chest. She'd used that word in reaction to the idea of Alus and Loki living together. That wasn't something she could overlook, and in that sense she didn't think she'd said anything improper.

However, as a noble lady, wouldn't using that word itself be discourteous?

After thinking for a while, she shook her head, as if to say this wasn't like her.

Tesfia stood up, whispering to herself that she should apologize for letting her emotions get the better of her and cursing at Alus. These kinds of things should be dealt with on the same day. Her mother, or some other wise person, had once said that settling things that happened on the same day was the secret to keeping any ill-will from remaining tomorrow.

She was nobility, and thus, determined to live up to those words.

Tesfia got permission from Felinella, the dorm supervisor, to leave the dormitory.

But considering the time—there was no one walking the grounds at this hour.

Tesfia walked fast. She wanted to settle this as soon as possible and return to the dorm. The sound of rustling leaves made her anxious, and even the street lights weren't much help.

"I should have just left it to tomorrow." She felt disheartened, then forcibly shook her head to dispel the feeling. She shrank inwardly at the thought, but in the worst case scenario she could ask him to escort her back to her dorm.

It would be a reasonable request, but a little shameless from someone who'd come to apologize.

Not again! There's that bad habit... besides...

But Tesfia was still concerned. She just couldn't overlook Loki staying in Alus' room. It went against the Institute's standard of ethics.

In the end, she hadn't realized at the time that using that as an excuse for her actions was wrong. And normally, Tesfia would have corrected herself for it on the spot. If not, she would have settled for apologizing the next time they met.

In short, it wasn't so urgent a matter that she had to request permission to leave the dorm. So ultimately, it wasn't just for this reason that she wanted to go. However, she was so busy making up excuses for herself that she wasn't aware this was the case.

"—Ah?!" Suddenly a gust of wind blew up, and Tesfia held down her hair as she turned her face away. "—!!"

In the next moment, she glanced around the night sky and spotted a shadow under the moonlight.

As Tesfia squinted to get a closer look, she drew in her breath.

There was somebody on the roof at this hour when nobody else was out. A silhouette that blended in with the darkness stood at the edge of the roof, peering into the distance.

No—she couldn't tell if that shadowy figure was looking anywhere. But it seemed as if it might leap off the roof at any moment.

"Who's there?" If it was an intruder, the correct response would have been to yell for help, or ready her AWR if she had it with her. But Tesfia picked a simpler action. She just asked.

She might have been shaken up... but it was more likely because that silhouette and atmosphere reminded her of someone.

"Al..."

That was her answer as to his identity. And once she said it aloud, her doubts began turning to conviction. Believing it was him, she was about to ask, "What are you doing up there...?"

But in that instant, he looked down and their eyes met.

While he may have been a shadow, his gaze was emotionless.

Tesfia's mind froze as if she was being stared down. The words she wanted to say disappeared.

There was no doubt it was Alus. Yet her instincts were telling her he was different from normal. There was an overwhelming and absolute distance, keeping her from easily calling out to him.

"..." Alus, looking down at her, didn't say a single word.

He narrowed his stare sent through the darkness. Not because he was trying to identify Tesfia. Instead, it was as if his eyes were saying he had no interest in her.

Tesfia stared up at the roof, unable to turn her gaze away even if she wanted to.



Then another strong gust of wind brought her back to her senses. Her hair fluttered in the wind, blocking her sight, and she hurriedly pushed her hair back.

But when she looked at the roof again, the shadow was already gone.

"Al... but..."

The face he showed at the Institute wasn't everything there was to him. She'd thought she knew that. Yet she suddenly found herself mortified at her own naïve thinking.

Loki knew. In one sense, being a Magicmaster was like living in true reality.

Tesfia couldn't put what his gaze said into words. But she could tell that, as Loki had told of Alus' deeds, those deeds didn't result from a simple straightforward journey. They weren't on the level that could be described with plain words like amazing, extraordinary, or excellent.

No, the size of Alus' achievements wasn't that big of a problem for Tesfia. A boy her age giving her that kind of expression spoke volumes about how much harshness he'd experienced, or maybe it was sorrow and despair. And she had no idea of the reality that had created that gap between them.

"..." It was so painful, heartbreaking and vexing that she felt like crying out. Her dislike of her petty side was greater than her desire to blame herself.

She was embarrassed at having been in such high spirits over her four-digit ranking at the Institute. But in the end, that shame wouldn't bring any solution about. She would need to readjust her perception of the world she was about to step into as being over-exaggerated.

She looked at the roof where Alus had been with determination. Then the reaction set in. Her legs started shaking, making her drop to the ground.

"Fia... from the looks of it, you couldn't do it. But it's okay. I don't think Al minds, and it's not too late to do it tomorrow."

Alice began comforting Tesfia when she returned to the dorm. The gloom on her face made it clear she hadn't seen Alus. But rather than outright asking her what happened, Alice decided to let it go until tomorrow.

"... Yeah. I'll do it tomorrow," Tesfia said. Her body still felt stiff and weary. Maybe it had just been his atmosphere, but to Tesfia, Alus had looked like he was carrying the world's heaviest burden on his own. Her eyes were downcast, thinking about it.

Alice spoke out as she looked at Tesfia being in a daze. "Fia, your habits from back home are coming back. I'm not your maid." She had a smile as if poking fun at Tesfia.

"Ah!" As a condition of enrolling at the Institute, Tesfia had to take care of her daily life on her own. She'd never cut corners since enrolling, and

had even learned how to live a common everyday life from scratch. Including changing her clothes when necessary.

It was probably an embarrassing situation, but Tesfia simply said, "That's right," and meekly entered the bedroom.

Still wearing her uniform, she collapsed onto her bed. The reality she'd been given a look of had exceeded her capacity to process. No matter how much she thought about it, she didn't feel like she'd ever reach a conclusion. She wasn't tired, but she didn't want to move and wanted to be left alone.

Alice knocked on the open door, out of consideration for her. The two of them were roommates, so there were, of course, two beds in the room. "Fia, if you're going to sleep, at least shower first. I'm not sure trying to appeal to Al with a smell fetish is going to work... and just imagining it makes me wonder if a crack is forming in our long friendship."

"That's mean! That's going too far... our friendship isn't that cheap... is it?"

"Nowadays, appearance is the same as friendship, you know." Alice spoke her mind in a teacher-like fashion, but when Tesfia glanced her way, she flashed her a mischievous smile.

"That's not what I'm trying to do! I always keep clean, too. You always see me after a bath, don't you? A-Ahem... anyways, I always smell nice. It has a healing effect!" Embarrassed over imagining her immodest appearance, Tesfia forcibly brought the topic back on track.

"There you go again with that boyish ideal... well, it works for me."

"Hey, that's unfair."

"Come on, get going. Smell aside, you need it, right?"

"Urgh... okaaay." Tesfia sloppily raised her arms in response, as Alice looked at her in amazement.

These two went back years. Whenever Tesfia, who normally never dwelled on things, had her heart seized like this, it was usually out of Alice's hands. But she knew Tesfia didn't usually obsess like this, so she quietly let her be.

Knowing Tesfia, she probably hadn't told the dorm supervisor she'd returned, so Alice decided to let her know and snuck out of the room.

Tesfia got up and pulled a change of clothes from her drawers. Perhaps because she wasn't used to folding clothes, the clothes were in there all asymmetrical.

There was no bathtub in their bathroom. In the dorm it was normal to use the public bath for that. But Tesfia didn't have the energy to walk that far.

She undid her hair, and unbuttoned her shirt. Putting her clothes into a basket, she entered the shower and blankly stared at the steam rising up into the ventilation. A warm stream of water washed over her head as she closed her heavy eyelids.

“Hahh...”

Tesfia was painfully aware of what her sigh was about. It certainly wasn't because she'd led a careless life since entering the Institute. While she might have been nobility, she had no duty to attend the Institute. In fact, there were quite a few families that preferred home lessons.

Of course, that required that they be affluent families with sufficient wealth and connections to call upon famous Magicmasters with the right know-how. And the Fable family was one such family.

Despite that, she had chosen to attend the Institute together with Alice, and somehow managed to convince her mother. In the process, she'd had to give up her spoiled life as a noble and take care of everything herself. And she'd put more effort than most into the path of becoming a Magicmaster as well.

Her ranking wouldn't just reflect on her, but also on her reputation. That's why the nobility were so fixated on rank.

However—

“That was... I...” She felt as if her efforts had all been just playing around.

Tesfia had experienced that a high-ranking Magicmaster was far from what she believed them to be. Everyone admired them and polished their magic for that sake.

But...

She pressed her arm against the wall, leaning against it. Neither the sensation of water running down her pale skin nor the sound of it could interrupt her thoughts.

“I did my best, I've tried harder than anyone else... what more am I supposed to do?”

The words she muttered were probably a reprimand and excuse for herself. When she saw Alus, she understood that he was living in the real reality, and that her world was a cradled world being carefully protected.

She traced a finger down the wall, then her arms went limp.

She no longer knew what she needed to do. She didn't know where she was headed.

Nor did she know what a Magicmaster truly was.

I continued to strive toward it, just like mother said...

Feeling like her existence was unneeded, Tesfia embraced her trembling shoulders in the thin steam.

Having finished her shower quicker than usual, Tesfia emerged from the bathroom in a pastel-colored negligee. Despite her shower, she still had a gloomy look on her face, and the bath towel slipped out of her hand.

Alice had returned to the room, and with her mischievous smile, used the bath towel to dry Tesfia's hair.

“Thank you, Alice.”

“It doesn't hurt, does it, my lady?”

"Oh, don't be so mean."

"Then don't make me worry. You're just yourself, Fia," Alice calmly said with an insolence-tinged smile that silenced Tesfia. But it still didn't sit right with her.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Oh, I wouldn't dare. I don't know what's on your mind, but I'm sure it'll be fine. I'm here too, you know." As Alice said this, she hugged Tesfia from behind, not minding the wet hair.

"Come on, you'll get wet." But Tesfia felt like a weight had been dropped from her shoulders. Her hesitation left her, and she sighed.

She and Alice probably weren't even at the starting line yet. Which meant that it would be up to them if their hard work had any worth. Tesfia must have felt a little too cornered if she hadn't even been able to reach such a simple conclusion. She thanked Alice in her mind.

But even then, she didn't tell Alice about what she'd seen and felt.

That wasn't just because Alice didn't ask her about it, but the day ended without Tesfia realizing that.

* * *

Alus' thoughts remained the same as he quickly traveled through the Outer World.

His gloomy, cold emotions left no room for excess feelings to worm their way in. His brain focused solely on eliminating the foreign elements.

At times like these, he couldn't even feel the refreshing breeze. Only the tense, disquieting portions of the atmosphere surrounding him could reach him.

"So it's around here."

The thicket was noisy. It wasn't due to the wind, but rather, the leaves were rustling in an odd way, as if the ground was shaking. The leaves moved as if something was looking for a way to invade.

As the heavy sounds got closer, Alus could hear something truly strange.

It wasn't, as expected, the sound of a massive creature traversing across the ground. It was as if something was using the tree trunks to move. Instead of the trees in the way collapsing, the big trees were unnaturally swaying to the sides.

It's coming.

"Sorry, but there's a roadblock in your way." The edges of Alus' lips curled up.

At the same time, overwhelming mana burst forth like a shockwave and moved through his hair. He drew his short sword AWR from behind him, mana flowing into it at a frightening pace.

As if slashing the darkness away, a beam of light flowed into the AWR, and Alus raised his free hand into the air. It was the kind of pose a commander would take after giving the order to charge.

«Gravity Cliff»

The Fiend made a bizarre sound as it moved closer.

But when Alus swung down his arm, the ground shook as if a giant's feet had stomped on it, and a colorless wall distorted the view of the sky. Closing its distance with the ground, the wall mercilessly descended.

The trees in the way didn't even serve to slow it down, as they were destroyed as soon as the wall touched the treetops. Cracks ran down the tree trunks as they were easily crushed beneath the pressure, and a large area was flattened along with the Fiend.

A thunderous roar unsuited to the silence of the Outer World rang out.

Alus stared expressionlessly at the circular depression that had been created. Pieces of wood stuck out of the ground where they'd been forcibly driven in.

This was a fearful power that could directly interfere with space, available only to Alus. Only a few people knew about this.

In the past, he'd crushed a one-eyed Fiend with a practical application of Gravity Cliff. It worked by having a pair of walls progressively narrow in their position to one another. That hadn't been on the level of interfering with space, but more like commanding space.

Even now, as the Outer World's appearance had been mercilessly and cruelly changed, nothing was different in Alus' mind. He simply stared straight forward.

In the next moment, a huge object flew into the sky, kicking up dirt all the while. The black thing fell down in front of Alus. It was heavy like a boulder.

The four legs supporting its body sunk into the ground each time it stepped firmly. Its legs stretched out from its grotesque, gigantic body like spider's legs. At the tip of each leg were five fat fingers that resembled human fingers. The torso was in the form of a distorted ellipse.

What made Alus furrow his brows was the face sticking out of its stomach.

The wriggling face spotted him. It gradually projected itself out from the body, sticking out from the stomach. It was easily three times the size of a human head. It crawled down to the waist part of the elongated torso and then stopped.

The black, lustrous body stiffened. The head split open, and countless eyes peeked out from within. Bizarre lips flapping to the left and right in the opening formed the mouth in the center. And a continuous noise like ultrasonic waves leaked out from it.

"I see you just transformed your body," Alus said, as if it didn't concern him, but this was a rare encounter.

Fiends absorbed mana, and once they exceeded a fixed value, they used the mana inside to remake their bodies. In other words, they went up in class, but the extent and degree of the change depended on the mana information absorbed.

The body stiffening was a characteristic of the transformation. Fiends were like the ultimate form of a receptor.

The military's information was that this was an A-class, but that was likely due to observing the results of the mana being released. Having found Alus, the perfect prey in the form of high purity mana, the Fiend's body was immediately completed. It was probably just a B-class a while ago. Which was why it had been discovered so late.

Alus thought to himself that they would've been fine with someone else instead of him. But then he recalled that high-ranking Magicmasters had recently been positioned in the Outer World, rather than at the defensive lines.

If it had been an A-class like the military had estimated, then a squad of Double Digits would be required. But even then, it was hard to say that would be enough. So he could kind of understand why he'd been called for this.

At the very least, Alus imagined that since he'd only recently left the military to enter the Institute, the formation of an urgent response team hadn't been completed. If he was being honest, he'd prefer that they at least be able to deal with something like this on their own, but he knew it wasn't that simple.

An A-class Fiend wasn't a threat that could be eliminated without sacrifice.

Cursing his bad luck, Alus stared at his target. Seeing what species it was, he was disappointed, thinking this Fiend wouldn't be able to satisfy him either. Its form was similar to a species called a many-legged ogre, but it was unshapely and unfinished-looking.

That was another characteristic of Fiends. This one still had the base it had been formed out of, and it was a common phenomenon for accessories to be added on when the creature transformed.

But none of that mattered to Alus. In the end, all he did was come up with the most effective strategy and put it into action.

The weaker Fiends that hadn't been killed by the first attack crawled up from the ground. At first glance, thirty of them remained.

Gravity Cliff wasn't a compression spell, and with the ground being relatively soft, the Fiends and their hard outer shells only got pressed into the dirt. However, it was enough to crush the lower-class Fiends along with their cores.

"Right. Let's end this, then."

The moment he said that—Alus seemingly disappeared from where he was standing.

The many-legged ogre's multitude of eyes could see him, but it was a couple of milliseconds behind.

And several Fiends collapsed into ash after Alus passed by. Their bodies grinded and twisted as they were killed one after another. Slaughter, atrocity, and trampling were all apt descriptions, but they would be slightly off. Even Alus' allies might shrink back in fear if they saw this scene.

They were exterminated as if it were mere child's play.

It was inevitable for this scene to look gruesome, like a human crushing ants underfoot.

Having finished off most of the weaker Fiends, Alus relied on his senses to dodge the ogre's leg swinging down from above, swiftly swinging his short sword... however.

His jet-black blade emitted a high-pitched sound. "Tsk," Alus chided. "You're pouring stupid amounts of mana into it." He snapped his wrist to shake off the numbness of his sword being deflected, cursing the Fiend, fed up by its pointless resistance.

In an instant, the many-legged ogre's leg approached from the darkness. The leg's five fingers spread out as it closed in.

Without missing a beat, Alus slid backwards to dodge, moving at a speed equal to the leg.

The five fingers moved irregularly as they gave chase. The fingers were just barely long enough to reach him. The fingers closed like a bear trap, but Alus slipped past them and moved alongside the stretched-out leg, going in to strike at the body.

The long leg turned around to chase after him.

Perhaps to counter the approaching foe, the Fiend's head started swaying. It swung back and forth rhythmically like a metronome, making it even creepier. The noise it was making turned to an even higher pitch, gradually becoming a strange voice.

What was it planning?

"That's some good resistance. It'll help you survive a few seconds more."

The AWR in Alus' hand quietly shone in the darkness, and as the power flowed into the chain, Alus whispered as he dodged the leg coming from behind.

"<<Volcanic Flare>>"

He flicked the small fireball born from the palm of his hand with his thumb.

Like a comet, it tore through the night, turning into hellfire in the blink of an eye, and impacted the Fiend's mouth.

Alus fixed his gaze on the Fiend whose mouth and upper body he'd blown off with the explosion, as he ran.

The Fiend desperately tried to put out the hellfire bursting from inside and outside with its legs, all while squirming in pain.

"There it is."

As the legs raised, Alus saw a glimmering light through the torso. Having spotted the Fiend's core, he jumped high up. Leaving his body to gravity, the jet-black blade flashed under the light of the moon.

He exhaled sharply. He was now standing atop a rock that was the perfect size to sit down on.

Alus bent a knee, resting his arm above it, still holding on to his AWR. A fight had taken place just seconds ago, but there was no blood on his clothing, and his breathing was perfectly regular. If anything, the way he

stretched his body made it look as though he'd only gotten some light exercise.

The vast pillar of light shining down from the full moon reached all the way to the horizon.

It was a soft light unique to the Outer World. Behind it were countless twinkling points of light.

"Ah, this is the first time I've seen this sky."

It was a completely silent moment. And he felt relief wash over him.

Life stopped moving as if it had fallen asleep. The way everything stopped and fell silent satisfied Alus' senses. The silence made him feel like nobody, not even he, could violate this world.

In that sense, the grotesque Fiend having been cut out of the cycle was like a foreign substance. As Alus thought this, he realized that he wasn't much different... and let out a laugh.

Alus realized he could never become a part of this world, as the majestic nature's breath brought life into the world. It would eventually clean away this damage from itself.

Everything here had come to an end.

Around the rock Alus sat on were the corpses of several Fiends. Their green blood flowed across the ground.

However, the bodies of the Fiends of all sizes soon turned into ash. The remnants of their mana mixed, and drifted high up into the sky.

And Alus simply stared at it, as if it were part of the night sky. A portion of the world was laid bare before his eyes.

His usual habit kicked in, and Alus unconsciously sought water, reaching for his waist.

Surely he couldn't be looking to pour water over himself at this hour... but going against expectations, Alus felt something thin and hard. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out between two of his fingers, furrowing his brow at it.

It was a familiar card. The only thing that proved his current position, his license. But now it was also his ID as a student.

He held it up against the moon, and let out a heavy sigh here in the Outer World where he didn't need to worry about the eyes of others. He lamented over how things had turned out, but didn't seem that upset by it, as a thin smile spread across his closed lips.

Alus' busy life at the Institute had been full of unexpected events, unlike the ones you'd find in the Outer World. But even with that, he hadn't imagined that peaceful world where he didn't have to worry about life and death would feel so comfortable.

In terms of age, Alus had the right to that kind of life, but he was unable to throw away the way he'd lived up until now. He was already immersed in the way of things in the Outer World. So he was unlikely to change.

Even if it was a false peace, it was fulfilling being at the Institute where your life wasn't constantly being threatened.

And Alus began to think that entrusting himself to that kind of life one day, wouldn't be too bad.

However—that would take him farther away from what he desired.

Stepping into the Outer World like this made him reaffirm that, but still, he wanted to spend just a little more time peacefully.

Only the sky was beautiful, while the surface was chaotic. That's why he admired it. Why he looked up to it. Why he reached out to it.

That said, this world wasn't without its worth. It was still fair and beautiful.

Even the wind blowing the traces of mana into the sky couldn't reach the moon and twinkling stars, leaving them untouched.

But the wind blowing without end knew all of the land laying unseen past the horizon.



* * *

On the day after the exam, Tesfia and Alice, for some reason, came to visit Alus early in the morning.

Finding it annoying, Alus ignored the sound of the knock... but he could see Tesfia with a tense expression, and Alice looking like her guardian by the door, or rather through the screen displaying the two visitors.

"Talk about a troublesome pair so early in the morning."

Alus worked a console by the wall and opened the door. But despite him making this effort, the two didn't enter. Wondering what they were scheming, Alus peeked over at the early visitors, in a fed-up mood.

Tesfia and Alice stood at the doorway. Seeing Alice's apologetic expression, Alus walked all the way over to them. And considering how reluctant Tesfia was behaving, when her liveliness was her sole merit, Alus figured it was about last night. "What is it?" He leaned against the wall, waiting to see what happened.

Contradicting his expectations, Tesfia lowered her head so fast that he was at risk of her ponytail slapping him in the face. "I'm sorry for saying something so thoughtless yesterday."

Alus had a puzzled look. But if she wasn't going to explain herself, he wouldn't be against simply going along with it. If anything, he wouldn't bring up a complicated matter and rub salt in her wounds. And ignoring it whenever it was referenced would be wasted effort.

So while he didn't know what it was about, he replied, "Yeah, it doesn't bother me. I don't mind you being so meek... either, but..."

After hearing him say this, a tuft of hair sprang up, and Tesfia put on a forced smile as if a weight had been lifted. "Phew, well, that aside..." She stepped inside with a polite, "Excuse me."

Alice followed suit, leaving Alus to close the door.

"—!! I knew it." Tesfia looked around the room, and raised her voice when she spotted Loki preparing breakfast like it was only natural. Loki was wearing her new uniform, with an apron on top.

Alice exclaimed, "Oh, Loki, that looks so good on you! I want to hug you... mmm, for now, I'll just help you with breakfast."

"Thank you very much. It's still morning, but you're so energetic. It's all right, I'm already done."

Alice had squealed in a strangely excited fashion, and offered to help Loki, but Loki deftly stopped her. As the two girls could see, preparations had started quite a while ago, and were almost all done by the time Alus got out of bed.

The table was small, but had room enough for four. Loki first served food to Alus, and then served herself. "What about you two?" Loki asked, before sitting down. This was, of course, simply out of courtesy, with no deeper meaning attached. There was no friendliness in her expression, and the question was just for the sake of appearances.

"We ate before we came, thank you, dear Loki."

"No, that's fine..."

Having expected these answers, Loki had already sat down at the table. Since their visit had been so sudden, it was uncertain if there was even enough for the two of them, but either way, Loki's intentions were clear.

Tesfia and Alice sat down like it was normal, then Tesfia began, "More importantly...!" She almost slammed the table, but her hand suddenly stopped in midair... and after glancing at Alus, she cleared her throat and modestly tapped the table instead.

She must be showing some consideration after yesterday's events... that said, it didn't stop Alus from eating. Loki, sitting opposite to the two, glared at Tesfia. If she'd been glaring because of Tesfia's lack of dining etiquette it would have been fine, but as some other emotions seemed to be mixed in, Alus felt his stomach hurt a little.

However, Tesfia shrugged off Loki's glare and continued, "Where did Loki stay yesterday?" As she was asking the only male at the table, her criticizing question was delivered in a roundabout manner.

But answering the question wasn't Alus, but the silver-haired girl next to him. "In Sir Alus' room, of course." Loki's 'what of it?' stare felt overwhelming, and it seemed to be saying, 'this has nothing to do with you' just like yesterday.

After Alus returned last night, the two of them had quickly eaten the dinner Loki made—he'd had to be convinced to do so, actually—and then discussed the matters of how to address each other and where each would sleep.

Their discussions didn't reach any conclusions, and as their stalemate continued to midnight, Loki stayed in Alus' room for the night.

That didn't mean anything happened. They simply shared a bed, and nothing of the sort that Tesfia or Alice had worried over had taken place.

That said, it was still something to be frowned upon.

In the end, Tesfia's questioning was cut short by Loki's stubbornness, and Loki and Alus quickly finished their food and prepared for class.

As this was her first day, Loki had a lot to prepare for. She would receive her materials from the Institute, and since she'd need to introduce herself during homeroom she had to arrive early, too.

Having been cut off, Tesfia reluctantly followed behind them. Of course, the topic came back around to where it had begun on their way to the main building, for a rehash of her doubts. "I don't believe it. You better not have done anything to Loki." Tesfia looked like she was staring at a pervert as she glared at Alus walking next to her. The intense stare was like radar measuring him to make sure nothing inexcusable had happened.

Alus felt like he was being investigated.

Tesfia had her own issues, but the one of impure relationships between men and women bothered her, and her expression was skeptical.

Alice had her usual wry smile as she pacified Tesfia. But considering Tesfia had that kind of attitude despite knowing Alus was the current No. 1, it was amazing in a sense. Though she'd apologized to the Magicmaster she should show respect to, it took a bold kind of person to call someone like him a pervert.

Alus felt like all of this was stupid, but for some reason he didn't completely hate this unproductive discussion. As a man, he had to deny these suspicions, or else it was clear he'd see hell for it. But before he could —

"I personally would love nothing more..."

Hearing Loki's muttering, the group stopped dead in their tracks. Tesfia especially was left shocked with her mouth wide open.

Alus shrugged, and pretended he hadn't heard it. "As if it would happen." ... or at least, he wished he could, but he couldn't ignore this, and so he firmly rejected the notion.

"O-Of course it won't. In fact, that's indecent..." Tesfia said with blushed cheeks.

Alus was dumbfounded that she could keep arguing this far, and gave Tesfia an unamused look.

"Loki, dear, how would you like to move to our room?" Alice suggested.

The dorm had two people per room. Just two made it cramped enough, but the fact that they had enough room to add Loki was a sign of Tesfia's influence at work.

Alice's polite suggestion did have a good point, though it was unclear what she herself was expecting out of this. Everyone decided not to press her on why she looked like she'd just gotten her hands on an adorable little animal.

But even then... "Don't mind me," Loki said, coldly pushing Alice away.

Alus personally wanted to see Alice keep it up a little more, but it seemed Alice wasn't going to try anything forcibly.

"You say something too!" Tesfia insisted, as if Alus shared her opinion.

"I don't care either way anymore."

"—!!"

This was because, regardless of whether he generally acknowledged it or not, Loki's presence didn't get in the way of his research. If anything, she was rather thoughtful. Whenever he looked for material, she'd find it right away; and she'd prepare something to drink at a moment's notice.

He wouldn't be particularly troubled without her, but he honestly had no reason to treat her coldly.

"...!! Since Sir Alus says it's fine, you have no reason to complain anymore." The reason Loki hadn't latched onto Alus' remark immediately, was probably because she'd been surprised by it herself. But now that she had a powerful pledge to back her up, she kept up the offensive.

Of course, Tesfia still couldn't accept it, and the two argued all the way to the main building.

Alice joined in on the attempts to persuade Loki partway through, but being as weak to pressure as she was, she didn't amount to much help, and was completely unable to help convince Loki.

Being indifferent to the matter, Alus ignored the noisy girls arguing, and went over the results he'd gained from his discussions with Loki yesterday.

First, she was going to drop the 'Sir' in front of other students on the Institute grounds, and just use his nickname Al. However, just reaching that compromise had taken several hours of negotiation, a failure in its own rights.

The compensation for that agreement was a costly one, as Alus lost a lot of validity and superiority when it came to Loki living with him. On that point, Alus had been unable to use common sense to convince her (or rather, she had completely ignored it), and he had no choice but to accept it.

* * *

Thanks to the principal's thoughtfulness, Loki ended up in their class. And she got through her introduction without any problems. She didn't make any mistakes, but the class getting fired up was something that just happened at the Institute.

Loki's feminine looks seemed to hit home with the girls even more than the boys. However, her calm smile that should've been directed at her classmates was solely pointed toward Alus.

Students at the Institute were in the same age group, but there were no actual restrictions on age. As long as the person had the potential to become a Magicmaster, their age didn't matter.

But since general education was part of the curriculum, those much older weren't accepted in order to avoid a waste of time. In those cases, it was common for the person to undergo training at the military's facilities.

Even Loki's short self-introduction only served to make her more popular. And her innocent smile, the intended for Alus smile, that she showed from time to time made her nearly irresistibly charming.

Captivated by her charm, the boys, and even the girls, sighed with an indefinable expression. It wasn't a yearning sigh, but rather one of universal affection.

On top of that, Loki's ranking was another point of interest. As the students strived to become Magicmasters, rank was something always kept in mind. So the matter of Loki's rank being brought up was inevitable.

However—
"570!!"

It was unclear who said it... but it had come from one of the students near Loki.

Hearing that, even Alus was surprised, but he soon realized why. The mock battle yesterday must have resulted in her being measured again. Then there was that large spell she'd used. While it was a taboo spell, it did use magic, and likely had been included in the measurement.

She had used the vertex of thunder, Naruikazuchi, the strongest spell of the lightning attribute.

Loki's ranking had originally been in the 100s, so it wouldn't be strange for her ranking to jump straight up to the middle of the Triple Digits.

As if waiting for Loki's rank to be brought up, the screen at the front of the classroom displayed the results of the exam's top scorers. The screen was used for class, but also for important announcements pertaining to the Institute.

Suddenly, all the students around Loki scattered, with their licenses in hand. While they wanted to know what ranks others had, they didn't want their own to be known.

In that opening, Loki moved over to Alus and smoothly sat down in a vacant seat next to him. Most of the time, that seat was always free during class. That was likely because, lately, everyone was starting to think something was fishy with him.

As the classroom filled with the quiet voices of joy or disappointment, Loki wondered aloud why her own rank had gone up, and asked Alus what he thought.

He gave her the answer he'd come up with before, to which she smiled in satisfaction.

Alus found Loki, a soldier, being worried over her ranking like a student to be unnatural, and looked at her quizzically. Being fixated on your rank was normal at the Institute, and Tesfia and Alice had done the same in the past. But that wasn't necessarily the case in the military, where actual battles took place.

Meanwhile, Tesfia's and Alice's rankings were revealed. And the ones that overreacted weren't them, but the ones with lower rankings around them.

"Ranks 4500 and 7833, huh. You two really are way ahead of us," a female student who often asked Tesfia and Alice for their advice said in admiration.

"You're almost in the four digits too, Ciel," Tesfia said.

Ciel, a petite classmate that had a different kind of adorableness to her from Tesfia, blushed.

However, there was some disappointment in Tesfia's voice as she praised her classmate. This was due to her own rank not going up all that much.

At the same time, her partner—the two would be unhappy at being lumped together like that, but Alus didn't see much difference between them so it wasn't that off the mark—Alice had shown a remarkable ascent from her former ranking of 8867.

But that in itself wasn't all that surprising. They'd only received a simplistic ranking during the entrance examination, after all. This more accurate measurement put them closer to their actual prowess.

Having finished checking their own rankings, the classmates looked around the room searching for Loki, the target of their attention. When they finally found her, the reason there was a pause before anything happened was likely because she was sitting next to Alus.

It couldn't be helped that they'd look at him so cautiously. Even more so, now that they knew Loki was a Triple Digit.

"Are you acquainted with Alus, Ms. Loki?" Ciel asked.

As Alus was thinking she was more courageous than she looked, he saw Tesfia and Alice behind her.

"Yes. Alus and I were close before we enrolled at the Institute."

That was one of the answers they'd prepared ahead of time.

You'd think such a statement would be said in a lively voice and with a big smile, but in reality Loki said it in a monotonous tone with an emotionless expression. Either way, since it was a harmless statement they'd prepared beforehand, all that happened was that Ciel was a little surprised.

But being as calculating as they were, once Ciel got the ball rolling, their classmates came over in droves to surround Loki. A transfer student being bombarded with questions was an unavoidable fact of life that likely happened everywhere.

Of course, Alus had no experience with that.

Anyway, as Loki's rank was close to Felinella's, she became an immediate star to those that didn't know about her circumstances.

While Loki was surrounded, Alus quietly snuck away... all while wearing a sympathetic smile.

Noticing this, Loki gazed at him with puppy eyes, but Alus left her behind as if to say, 'get used to it,' and stepped out of the classroom.

... I guess she really is in a bad mood.

Alus glanced over from his book to Loki during morning class. Her silver hair was hanging down, keeping him from seeing her face, but it was likely as expressionless as usual.

While she didn't have an easy to understand personality like Tesfia, she was equally as difficult to handle.

That said, Alus wasn't going to use his time to cheer her up. After all, the same thing was going to happen during lunch.

Once the chime signaling the end of class rang out, the students came around as expected. There were even some on standby at the doors.

And the first to come running was... Alice. She couldn't endure staying away from Loki any longer and was now rubbing her head. "Ahhh... You're so cute, and your hair is so silky."

Tesfia, exasperated, asked the grinning Alice, "You're not going to spend all of lunch doing that, are you?"

"Just wait a little more, so I can get my fill."

Alus refrained from asking anything about that comment, and decided to head to the cafeteria to get lunch. Not planning on making the same blunder twice, he'd even brought his license.

Loki had been passively letting Alice pat her head, but when she saw Alus leave the classroom, she quickly chased after him.

Of course, another two followed suit, but strictly speaking Alice was chasing after Loki, while Tesfia was just tagging along.

That essentially meant that the top three of the first years were walking together in a group, but nobody else chased after them.

But Alus, forced to hide his abilities that surpassed the three, walking with them, was exposed to even more strange looks.

As expected, the cafeteria was as crowded as always.

Not only did Alus not repeat his mistake, he operated the vending machine with the familiar motions of a regular, giving Tesfia a satisfied look before sitting down at a table big enough for ten.

She responded with an exasperated expression, but Alus didn't pay any attention to it.

He could understand Loki seating herself next to him. "But why are you guys coming along, too?"

"It's lunch, so it's fine. Besides, this was your first time, right? This was thanks to me, you know."

"It was my first time operating the machine alone, but that has nothing to do with you."

Tesfia tried arguing her case with logic that made no sense. But it was true she had helped the time before, and only Alus understood what she'd meant by that.

As they argued, Alice put down her tray on the table as well, making Alus realize he was the only one being uncivilized in this situation. "Pardon the intrusion," Alice said.

While it was crowded, there were still open seats. The cafeteria had the capacity to seat everyone, so long as not all the students came barging in at once.

The four were tucked away at the end of the table, with Tesfia defiantly sitting down across from Alus. He couldn't help but let a sigh escape. In fact, after this, Alus would be letting out one sigh after another.

"May I sit next to you, Mr. Alus?" a familiar voice said.

The group stopped eating and turned their attention to the newcomer. Surprised expressions appeared on their faces, but they weren't seeing things.

Standing there was Felinella with her tray in hand, waiting for Alus' answer. Despite the crowded cafeteria, there seemed to be an inviolable air around her.

Alus glanced over at the other students, who appeared to be looking away out of envy or awe, and thought to himself that being this charismatic was scary.

Unsure of how to interpret Alus' reaction, Felinella came right next to Alus with a perplexed look. "Is that not acceptable?" As he turned to look, she bent down and moved her hair behind her ear, bringing her face close to his.

Astonished gasps came from the surrounding area, followed by excited voices mixed in as well for some reason.

It was easy to be smitten by her beauty. Alus wasn't very good with Felinella. She was somewhat like Sisty, with a bewitching body and an elegant tongue. It was hard to say no to her. Just looking into her eyes was enough to draw you in. "Go ahead and do as you please."

This curt response was his way of defending himself from being dragged into Felinella's orbit... but he was aware it was a frail defense.

"Thank you very much," Felinella said politely, but with a hidden meaning behind it. She herself might not have been aware of it, but the elegance she was born with made people give up their initiative to her.

As a result, Felinella secured a seat next to Alus. The only reason she didn't sit down immediately was because there was someone at the table she hadn't met before. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Loki."

After paying due respects to Alus, Felinella greeted Loki with a smile. It seemed rumors of Loki's transfer had spread throughout the Institute.

Loki saw that beguiling smile and got the same first impression of her that Alus had, but her own expression remained the same without a hint of friendliness. "Nice to meet you, Lady Felinella."

During her briefing with Alus yesterday, Loki had looked through the upperclassmen's register. That's why she was aware of Felinella, including that her father was a member of the military.

After that, Alus gave Felinella, as well as Tesfia and Alice, the bare minimum of information on Loki, ending their introductions. But it need not be said that Alus was bombarded with hostile stares from the other students witnessing this bizarre scene. With four beauties around him, it was only natural he'd become their target of envy.

But in the next moment—those stares stopped.

The cafeteria, which could seat 1,000 people, had five large screens so that everyone could view at least one. After a beep signaling that new information was about to be revealed, the announcer came on to announce the details.

"This is an announcement regarding an extracurricular lesson that will be put into practice. On the 28th day of the fifth month, after graduation, students will take their first steps as Magicmasters, taking part in live combat training."

The articulate voice continued, "We will have you take part in the actual elimination of Fiends. We will distribute detailed information for each class. I repeat..."

Eventually, the announcement ended, and the screens returned to normal, as a wave of commotion shook the cafeteria commons.

In the uproar, more than a few students dropped their tableware onto the floor.

To students looking to become Magicmasters, live combat was something they couldn't avoid, but at the same time it was their biggest obstacle.

Those with a backbone were raring to go, but the majority of students found themselves at a loss.

As for Alus' table... as he and Loki already knew, they continued eating like nothing had happened.

Felinella, with her combat experience, was surprised at the sudden news, but soon muttered, "The principal sure has it rough." After that, she calmed down and returned to her meal like the first two.

As for the other two—

"Y-You sure are... composed," Tesfia said. Her spoon had nothing on it, and drifted in the air without a place to go. She spoke in a stiff tone, completely the opposite of being composed, still staring at the screen.

"Why now?! This has never happened before..." Alice said with a bewildered look on her face.

She seemed to be looking for help, and the only one present that could answer her was Alus, but explaining the situation to her wasn't going to change anything. Instead it would only make her anxious and frustrated, so Alus kept quiet. By now, both Alice's and Tesfia's faces were quite pale.

"I wonder what they'll do. It seems the other institutes are already doing something similar, but this will be this institute's first attempt," Felinella said in a quiet voice, but made sure it was loud enough for Alus to hear. She shifted her eyes in his direction.

It was a bother, but Alus responded in an equally low voice, "I've already had some of the pain shoved onto me." He had no obligation to respond, but she was a candidate to be a supervisor for a freshmen team... he couldn't hold out on all of the information.

"I see. Sorry for causing you trouble."

"You can say that again."

However, Felinella didn't dig any deeper into it. She cast her eyes down and ended the conversation. It seemed she was looking out for him.

That's why Alus felt at his ease with her, and closed his eyes. Even if it was just for a moment... before this tumult died down... he wanted to rest.

The sensation of being unable to keep up with the ever-changing scenery around him took him over. These were restless days, even without the responsibility of being the strongest Magicmaster with its corresponding sense of duty. Anything he did brought something with it. Like the hands of

the clock that continued to move, the peaceful days were being driven away with a tick-tock, as if in tune to his beating heart.

Just what did he desire?

Having lived a practical and utilitarian life, Alus had no way of knowing what he'd been missing. That's why he was trying to accept the difficulties that came with relationships. He didn't even need to confirm his own state of mind by now.

After all, these turbulent days were turning into a completely new everyday life.

But there was no time to notice that change...

"Al?" As he had stopped eating, Loki worriedly called out to him, bringing him back to reality.

There was no time to rest... but it was never boring.

Afterword

Thus, this work was born.

Alright! And this marks a good stopping place.

I worried quite a bit whether I should start off my Afterword with this.

To first-time readers, and to the readers of the web version, thank you very much for picking up this book. I never even dreamed that we would be able to meet in this format.

I am very indebted to those of you who supported the web version! I hope that I was able to live up to some of your expectations by turning this work into a novel.

This series was originally hosted on the Shousetsuka ni Narou website when HJ Bunko contacted me, resulting in this publication.

As the particulars of how this series came to be will drag on, I'd like to omit this due to the amount of space I have available...

Instead, I'd first like to write about our protagonist, Alus.

Despite having gained everything, he is still restrained. Or more accurately, because it was so easily gained, shackles and fetters follow him around.

This story is about how Alus, who only knows battle, begins on a journey to learn about himself. While literally being the world's strongest, he will go on to regain that definitive piece of himself that he's missing, while at the same time finding and cultivating something irreplaceable.

Being the world's strongest—while also greatly lacking something—is kind of a contradiction in itself.

And this story is about how this lone Magicmaster, this lone human being, the very warped Alus Reigin becomes a true protagonist.

As the author, I am particularly fond of him. Of course, I believe you can enjoy a different kind of appeal from the characters that appear around him.

However, compared to how the readers interpret and enjoy this work, my goal is but a trivial matter. If you were able to find enjoyment in the path Alus took, or let your imagination run free in regards to this story, I would feel blessed as the author.

Moreover, if I was able to bring out a response to the scenes I put extra hard work into, there is nothing that would make me happier.

Well then, I would like to give thanks to everyone involved with this publication.

It was thanks to Hobby Japan's editorial department, my assigned editor T-sama, the fans supporting my humble work, and the managers of Shousetsuka ni Narou who provided a place for me to put my scrawlings that this series came to see the light of day. And I would like to use this place to give you my heartfelt thanks.

I am also very thankful to my assigned illustrator, Miyuki Ruria-sama, for the gorgeous illustrations. It's like the protagonist and heroines in my head suddenly came to life. Just witnessing the high quality, vivid illustrations was enough for the story in my mind to grow even further. I truly look forward to continuing to work with you again.

Finally, I would like once again to thank you, the readers, for picking up this book.

How did you like *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*? If there was even just one part that you enjoyed, as the author, I would rejoice.

I look forward to meeting you again in the near future, in the Afterword for Volume 2.

Izushiro
February 2017

Bonus Short Stories

The Night Before the Entrance Ceremony

"It's finally starting," Tesfia said, as she got out of bed in the early morning, her hands on her hips.

She'd woken up while the sun was still low. Her eyelids were heavy, a sign that she could use some more sleep, but she forced them open.

...Well, she was just too excited for the day to sleep any more. "Come on Alice, wake up. We'll be late for the entrance ceremony!"

"Okaa-y... Wait! There's still four hours left!"

Without even rubbing her eyes, Alice slumped back into bed. Not about to let that slide, Tesfia walked up to her bed and pulled off her quilt, freely exposing a strangely seductive appearance.

Urgh... we're the same age, so why are we so different...

Alice tried to reel the quilt back in and go back to sleep. Her thighs were wrapped in short pants, and she was wearing a one-piece nightdress with exposed shoulders. The longer hem just barely covered the short pants.

Tesfia struggled with what to say, and where to look. As a noble, she was wearing something befitting of her status, a camisole one-piece, where her faint pink skin was just barely showing through... In terms of exposure she wasn't losing to Alice. But... after seeing how sexy Alice was when sleeping, she didn't have the courage to stand before a mirror.

"...Don't come crying to me if you're late."

After throwing that out, Tesfia began getting ready.

She took a shower, then got to work drying her hair. She could do that even without a maid now. She was confident she was skilled enough to prepare herself to the point where she could attend any event without being ashamed.

Her uniform had no wrinkles whatsoever, full of expectations and dreams. It was the perfect symbol for the start of her new life.

After some time, Alice finally woke up. Tesfia spun around and asked her how she looked, but she was confident that her looks were perfect.

"...Really?"

But going against Tesfia's expectations, Alice sounded exasperated. Seeing the mess the room was in, her sleepiness was blown away. Clothes were on the floor, with personal care items scattered about. They'd only moved in yesterday, so why did their room look like they'd lived here for months?

After putting her hand on her forehead, Alice looked at the clock and spoke in a troubled fashion, "Fia, that hair... no, there's no time to fix it..."

Tesfia looked at her in amazement. According to Alice, not only had she mixed up her buttons, but her collar was disheveled, and just how did she mess up drying her red hair? She looked like a delinquent in her rebellious phase? Despite Tesfia's own confidence, not even Alice, who wasn't

particularly picky about appearances, felt like she was above a passing grade for a maiden her age. She'd done her best without a maid, but Alice felt a headache coming on if this was the result of her waking up so early.

Hearing Alice's opinion, Tesfia timidly brought herself before the mirror. "Uhm... really?"

She couldn't believe how she looked. "I tried so hard, too," she muttered, as she looked questioningly at herself, with tears in her eyes.

...Thanks to Alice's efforts, she finished fixing Tesfia up quicker than expected. And Tesfia then pulled her hand while they made their way to the Institute, as if nothing had happened.

It would be a few more hours before the two, making their way to the entrance ceremony, would meet with *him*.

Chasing that Distant Back

She'd been watching from afar, trying to feel him, and now that distance had shrunk a little.

But right now, all she was allowed to do was watch from the shadows. It was the moment she'd longed for. That's why to her, her assigned role as an observer was just a pretense.

It was possible to perceive a specific existence through mana wavelengths. Normally that kind of detection was used against Fiends, and this was the first time she'd used it for something else. Though she couldn't see him, she could feel his awe-inspiring wavelengths... which made it much easier to find him.

When she sensed him, she felt a warmth in her chest. But it was a different sensation from burning his appearance into her mind. That's why the spectacle before her didn't quite feel real, and deep emotions washed over her.

She watched him from afar, and the guilt she felt from it was very painful.

He'd surely already noticed. If she could, she would want nothing less than to throw herself before him, get on her knees, thank him for what he did that day and reveal all the feelings she kept hidden within.

Keeping her feelings in check, she stared at his back, thinking that he might turn her way any second now. He still had traces of his old self, but now looked even more manly. Seeing his back brought up Loki's unease caused by the passage of time.

Does he even remember me?

She wanted him to remember. But, raising her head, Loki shook away her desire. As long as she remembered—that was enough. She didn't ask for anything more, she couldn't. All she had was near-infinite gratitude, and words of thanks. The only wish she had was to repay the favor for that day. When she caught a glance at his profile, she reconfirmed that her feelings remained true and unchanged.

Loki reforged her resolve. With him finally before her, she was able to identify that her feelings were neither lies nor deception.

"If it's for that person's sake..."

Her heart was pounding, racing rapidly, and she pressed against her chest as if to tell herself that her unexpected discomposure was just a trick of the mind. She put more and more force into her hands, until her clothes were wrinkled.

She'd only been given the mission to observe him a few days ago, and she'd worn herself out considerably just waiting for this time to arrive. But she no longer had to wait.

Loki had put her everything into anything she did, charging straight through her ordeals, with that back as her goal. In terms of ability she was no closer than when she began... but right now she yearned for that back that was within arm's reach.

Finally, it would begin.

Finally, she could repay him.

Finally, I can exist for you.

Loki's eyes were fixated on him, to the point where she forgot about the eyes of others. Yes... Finally she could feel him.

* * *

I've caught you.

Silver hair danced in rhythm with her steps. With a slightly mischievous look, she bent forward and peeked at his face.

"Sir Alus?"

"Hm? What?" his usual blunt voice replied.

"Sir Alus... I caught you."

She lightly grabbed his sleeve. She'd yearned for his very existence. And when she traced through her memories of the beginning all those years ago, she smiled with a light blush.

The Greatest Magicmaster's Infiltration Plan

Fuck! He completely took me in, that goddamned old man!

Hiding in the space under the stairs, Alus kept himself from swearing out loud. At this very moment a group as angry as Fiends was hurriedly running down those stairs. In their hands were weapons of all kinds, AWRs...

Their normally beautiful voices were now replaced by maddened bellowing as the girl's dorm turned noisy.

For each time a phrase such as "Pervert!" or "Creep!" was shouted out, Alus' cheeks twitched from the damage to his pride.

The other day, he'd stepped into the unknown land known as the Second Magical Institute and didn't know left from right. That said, he personally didn't think it was anything worth knowing, either. But the Governor-General made sure to insist that he greet the principal and girl's dorm supervisor. The principal was one thing, but he had no idea why he needed

to pay the dorm supervisor any respect. Especially as it was the girl's dorm and not the boy's dorm.

However, if it was to avoid a future mess, then he wasn't against saying hello. The reality, though, was incomprehensible. And now he was in this situation just from taking one step inside the place.

To think this would happen just because I entered from the roof... Why do I even need an appointment to come in through the front door? This is all that old bastard's fault!

He'd come all this way, and turning back right away would be too much of a pain. Ultimately, he'd decided to forcibly infiltrate the building without being noticed. But the security in the dorm far exceeded Alus' expectations, it was like a fortress. Before long the alarm rang out and several of the girls saw him from behind. That was enough to identify that the intruder was a boy.

Now they were gunning for him with bloodshot eyes. If he was caught he'd surely be bombarded by curses until they got bored, and perhaps even made into an example in front of the whole Institute. At the very extreme, he might be dishonorably discharged from the Institute, but for this to be the reason was too much for Alus.

"This is just the worst." It was only a matter of time before he was found at this rate. In that case— The moment he thought that, he could feel the presence of somebody sneaking close to him.

"Is someone there... ?" somebody said, in a frightened tone of voice. At the same time, the female student peeked down to look at the bottom of the stairs. She felt like she'd just seen a strange shadow... Suddenly an arm came out from the shadows and blocked her sight.

"Eeek?!"

The next moment she could see again. While she had been unable to see, her body hadn't been touched. She'd closed her eyes in fear, but when she opened them there was nobody there. She nervously looked around, but the owner of that arm was long gone.

With Alus' speed, it wasn't difficult to get past her without being seen. But with how cramped the area was, he would need to pass close by the girls. And there was a high chance he'd be detected due to the wind pressure from his speed indicating to the girls that someone had passed them, and in a specific direction.

That's why he made a swift decision. With the girls gathering on the first floor, he headed towards the roof. But his efforts went to waste after all.

"...He's not coming. He must have run up to the roof!" a pursuer with good intuition shouted.

"Now that you mention it, I did feel something strange, what was that?" "It was so fast, I couldn't see it!" the voices said, one after another.

But it was too late to change his plans now. He clicked his tongue in his mind and dashed down the hallway, making his way to the stairs leading up to the roof on the opposite side. That's when his sharp senses picked up

people talking. Strictly speaking, the origin of the voices wasn't the hallway, but a room connected to it.

Just as Alus realized what was going on, the door directly ahead of him on his path opened, and a redheaded girl appeared. She was still talking to someone, looking back into the room.

"Fia, it's dangerous. Come back inside!"

"It's okay, I'm just going to—"

"Tsk—" The redheaded girl wasn't paying attention to Alus at all. But unable to stop, he was rapidly approaching her.

But—he had no need to slow down to escape from this predicament. Before they crashed, Alus skillfully kicked off the wall and disappeared from her field of view in an instant.

"Ahh?!"

Using the wall to jump over her, he continued running without looking back. She couldn't have seen his face from their brief exchange. Just moments after safely arriving at the roof, the door slammed open and all the girls piled onto the roof.

"Huh...?"

"This is the fifth floor, isn't it?"

They'd heard the door to the roof open, and were sure they had the intruder cornered... but the culprit was nowhere to be found.

I could escape if they leave... but what to do...

Alus was hanging off the wall, but when he looked down, he lamented that this commotion probably wouldn't die down for a while.

The Greatest Heroine's Presentation Plan Attention!

This short story contains spoilers, so it's recommended that you read it after finishing the book first.

Tesfia: "Ahem. Hello, all of you *Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan* fans... ah ha..."

Tesfia's smile is awkward and forced. Her red hair lacks its usual luster, and her ponytail hangs low. She tells the silver-haired girl next to her how she really feels.

Tesfia: "This is just too sudden...! I couldn't prepare at all!"

Loki: "Would you like to practice your forced smiles some more?"

Tesfia: "Urgh... I'm supposed to be a guest here."

Loki: "So it seems... By some mistake, you're here instead of Sir Alus. Talk about ruining the mood. Of all the times for him to be given an important mission! Normally, Sir Alus should get priority over her too, geez."

Tesfia: "You're complaining out loud!"

Loki: "Hmm? What are you talking about? I don't think you have any right to talk about others. Well, now that you're here there's no helping it. I'll just have to endure it for Sir Alus' sake."

Tesfia: "Ms. Loki? Your way of speaking is becoming careless. I think you're being too rough with me."

Loki: "No, I've been like this from the start. Besides, a red pickled ginger is enough to replace you."

Tesfia: "Cruel!"

Loki: "None of that matters, so just go finish your work already so you can leave."

Tesfia: "I'm going to cry here..."

Loki: "That would be unsightly. But I don't mind, so go ahead and cry your heart out, go on."

Tesfia: "... I'll pass!! Just start the show already."

Loki: "Oh well. Then I'll begin."

Loki casts her eyes down, and then raises her head. In the blink of an eye, the atmosphere changes, and it's like a flower blooms before Tesfia. Loki normally never lets her emotions show on the surface, but right now she has a big bright smile on her face.

Loki: "Hello everyone, my name is Loki Leevahl and it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance!"

Tesfia: "W-What?! ...How can you change that fast? I didn't know you had a special trick like that!"

Loki: "If you call yourself a heroine, at least be able to do something like this. What was that just now? That's just rude to all of the readers."

Tesfia: "Urk... uh, nice, to meet you..."

Loki: "Ahh, that strained smile is just perfect! Then let's move on."

Tesfia: "Wait a minuuute!"

Loki: "So Ms. Tesfia, which scene left the biggest impression on you? Go."

Clapping her hands, Loki urges Tesfia to answer. Tesfia recoils, but eventually recovers and puts her finger on her chin as she goes through her memories.

Tesfia: "Hmm, the highlight for Volume 1 would be my showdown against Al where I just barely lost, and that time when he looked down at me from the roof of the research building. I thought he was an intruder, and he didn't even greet me. Considering that look in his eyes, he must've been looking to avoid paying the debt he owed me from the cafeteria."

Loki: "To think something like that happened when I wasn't around ... that's a little unpleasant, so I think it's time to wrap this up."

Tesfia: "...You just do whatever you please, don't you?"

Loki: "I'm the host, so I won't accept any complaints. You low-ranker can just be quiet."

Tesfia: "Yes, yes... just do what you want!"

Loki: "So, Ms. Tesfia, don't you feel like doing one last job?"

Tesfia: "Huh? You're going to say that after wrapping things up?"

Loki: "Of course. You're the one using Sir Alus' precious appearance time. What can I do with you? I'll give you one last chance, so go ahead and give the final thanks."

Tesfia: "So sudden!"

Loki: "3, 2, 1. Go."

Tesfia grips her skirt, drags one foot behind the other and bows. With a glossy smile and upturned look, she speaks.

Tesfia: "Thank you for your purchase. It has been an honor for this Tesfia Fable."

Loki: "To think you wouldn't hesitate to flirt like that... the only grace you have is disgrace."

Tesfia: "..."

Tesfia's shoulders tremble, before coming to a complete stop. Eventually her head drops. She then mechanically turns to look at Loki. Her eyes are blank, reflecting nothing but hollowness. A dry "hahaha" signals that she's lost it, and she has tears in her eyes.

Tesfia: "Waaaaah..."

Loki: "She snapped?! What, you have tears in your eyes!? Ah, that's ice magic! We really will get scolded if you use that! Whoa, stop!"

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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: Volume 1

by Izushiro

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